

It's A Super Life

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Summary: The sequel to It Happened One Super Night; what happens next?

It's A Super Life

This story is a sequel to 'It Happened One (Super) Night', which was posted on the Archive in January; many thanks to everyone who asked me to write the sequel. This story also has some nfic content, which I'm quite nervous about since I've never written nfic before. So I would appreciate feedback! A PG-13 version will be posted to the fanfic archive in due course, so anyone who is under 18 or really cannot stand my 'sexy' scenes might want to look at that version.

The story picks up about a week after 'Super Night' ends, and if you haven't read the earlier story you might need to take a quick look at it; some of the events referred to might not make sense without having read it.

As usual, I acknowledge the borrowing of characters from DC Comics and Warner Bros; no infringement of anyone's rights is intended.

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- It's a Super Life -

Lois stood in the middle of Clark's living-room and looked around helplessly at the crates and boxes which littered the floor.

"Clark, it'll take forever to get all this stuff unpacked and sorted. I knew we should have asked Jimmy if he'd be willing to help!"

Clark glanced up from his task of installing Lois's fish-tank. "You sure about that, Lois?"

"Well... I mean, just look at it all!" she replied, waving her hands about vaguely. "And I'm not much help - I can barely bend down at the moment!"

He grinned as he turned to face her. "Aren't you forgetting something, my beautiful, pregnant fiancee?"

"Like what?" Lois couldn't understand how Clark could be so blasé; it seemed to her that they had a long and very tiring job in front of them. She was already exhausted: being nearly seven months pregnant wasn't exactly the best state to be in when moving apartments! It had taken Lois and her sister Lucy several days to pack all of her possessions into crates and boxes; Clark had offered to help, but he'd had to go away on assignment for the Planet and anyway, Lois had wanted to have a clear-out at the same time and so she hadn't been sure that Clark's help would have been particularly useful.

But here she was; they had loaded up a hired van that morning with her furniture and possessions and taken them over to Clark's place at 344 Clinton. His Super-strength had of course come in very handy: he had unloaded the van - taking great care not to be seen - swiftly and easily, and now her belongings were piled up in the middle of the living-room.

"Like the fact that I'm Superman?" Clark crossed his arms in front of his chest in the distinctive stance which still, to Lois, seemed incongruous when he was dressed as Clark. "That's why I didn't want Jimmy or anyone else here." He crossed the room to stand in front of her, and held her lightly by her shoulders. "Why don't you put your feet up on the couch for a while and let me get on with it?"

Lois reached up, unable to resist the temptation his lips presented by their proximity to hers; he returned her kiss with an intensity which spoke clearly of his need for her. He, rather than she, deepened the kiss, thrusting his tongue forward to invade her mouth, although she responded with an energy born of her need and love for him. It was ironic, Lois reflected: although she was pregnant with his child, they had not been intimate with each other since the night of conception, and they were both becoming more and more frustrated with their need for each other. Oh well, she thought, perhaps tonight... if we're not too worn out from all this...

She became aware of a floating sensation, and opened her eyes to realise that it wasn't simply the effect of Clark's kiss. They were actually levitating towards the sofa... She clung more tightly to Clark; although she was getting used to his demonstrations of Super-ability and she trusted him not to drop her, being suspended in mid-air was still quite disconcerting.

He lowered her onto the sofa cushions and for a moment it seemed as if he was about to join her. The full length of his body hovered over hers, and he allowed his lips to trail along the line of her jaw as his hands caressed the curve of her neck and the swell of her breasts. Lois moaned in enjoyment, reaching up to pull his mouth firmly back onto hers. Until just over a week ago she had had no idea that Clark Kent had it in him to be so passionate - or that she found him quite so irresistibly attractive. Yet now she found it impossible to understand how she could ever **not** have found him attractive. Why had she not hauled him off to her bed on the first day they met? Why

had they wasted so much time? It wasn't even as if she hadn't *known* that under the ill-fitting suits he'd worn then he had a body to die for!

"Mmmm, Clark, I love the way you do that," Lois murmured as his tongue feathered lightly along the inside of her ear-lobe. "You've no *idea* what you do to me!"

"Oh yeah, Lois, I think I have," he murmured softly, his husky voice sending shivers down her spine. "If it's anything like what you do to me every time you touch me, I think I know exactly!"

Clark continued to trail his fingers lightly along the open neckline of Lois's maternity blouse, taking care to maintain his position floating above her body. He was very conscious that he was much bigger than Lois, and that his Kryptonian body-mass meant that he was also heavier than a human male of equivalent height and build. He therefore was anxious not to hurt her in any way, and particularly not to hurt their unborn child. He was aware that his relative inexperience with intimacy probably made him more careful and hesitant than he need be, but his Lois - oh, it felt so good to think about her in those terms! - was being patient with him, allowing him to explore the many ways in which they could demonstrate their love for each other, and teaching him what felt good for her. He had always been a quick learner, and he hoped that in this area he was demonstrating aptitude for the subject. He was certainly learning to recognise and understand the little betraying indications of Lois's arousal, such as the faint moan deep in her throat when he kissed her passionately or allowed his fingers to explore her favourite erogenous zones, or the little jerky movements which suggested that she was becoming even more excited.

As yet, of course, they had not made love since discovering their feelings for each other and the secrets which each had been hiding from the other. Clark considered, in fact, that they had yet to make love properly; the first time, he hadn't come to her as Clark, and although Lois had explained to him, very convincingly, that she had come to love him as Clark rather than as Superman, there was still something inside him which felt the need to be accepted as the man he truly was rather than the costumed Super-hero as whom he sometimes had to masquerade. As well as that, of course, his memory of the one and only time he had made love with Lois was still very hazy. He had been ill and feverish, and hadn't been in full possession of his senses when it had happened. This fact had given him some cause for concern, and it was part of the reason they hadn't made love since deciding that they were in love. He couldn't help wondering whether he had really satisfied Lois on that occasion; he had been a virgin - with a lot of theoretical knowledge, it was true, but the practice was very different! - while she had been experienced. Had he simply taken what he'd wanted without giving her pleasure? Was he going to be able to pleasure her properly when they did make love? Was it even safe for them to make love? He didn't want to risk harming the baby, and as yet he had felt too shy to ask her whether her gynaecologist had said anything about lovemaking in the third trimester.

Unaware of these fears and insecurities running through Clark's brain, Lois was enjoying the blissful sensations created by his caresses. She reached for him, attempting to pull him closer to her, craving the feel of his body against hers. He was wearing a pale grey T-shirt, and she reached for the hem, sliding her hand beneath to

stroke his muscular chest. "Clark - let me take this off," she murmured throatily. "It's getting in the way."

At the pleasurable shock of her hand on his bare flesh, Clark nearly lost his concentration and felt himself beginning to fall. Exercising what little control he had left over his reflexes, he managed to recover his position suspended in mid-air a few inches above Lois's body. "I'm sorry," he muttered anxiously. "I don't want to hurt you - I'm far too heavy for you."

Lois laughed softly, deep in her throat.. "I'm sure you're not, sweetheart - trust me." She reached again for his T-shirt. "Let me?"

But Clark stilled her hand with his own, his voice unsteady as he protested. "Not right now, Lois - I should get on with sorting this lot..." He gestured towards the clutter on the floor, then got to his feet. "We'll have plenty of time for... this... later."

Disappointed, Lois's mouth turned down at the corners and she pulled a face at him. "Spoilsport! You get me all turned on and then call a halt - what sort of a way is that to treat the woman you love?"

Clark hesitated, torn between the urgent demands of his body which was insisting that he immediately return to Lois's embrace, and his mind, which was arguing that he needed time to think, to prepare himself for that final act of intimacy which, he knew, they both badly wanted to experience together. Surely, if he thought about how he wanted it to happen, planned his strategy, created the perfect romantic environment for making love, it would be much better than a rushed and out-of-control coupling on his sofa?

Or was he just being a coward?

Whichever, he thought as he backed away with an apologetic smile, it'll be better when we're not surrounded by this mess. And Lois needs to rest for a while - it's been a busy day so far.

He noticed that she still looked disappointed, and he instantly felt guilty. "It's not that I don't want to, Lois... oh, you have no idea how much I do - I just think that it'd be better to wait until later, when we have more time. Is that okay..." he hesitated, then ventured, "honey?"

Lois's beautiful lips curved into a full smile as she murmured assent to his suggestion. It was the first time Clark had used an endearment for her; although she had been calling him 'honey' and 'sweetheart' since they had announced their engagement to his parents, he had been more reticent. She had wondered why; after all, his parents, Jonathan and Martha, had always been openly affectionate, in words and deeds, both with each other and with Clark. It was a little strange that he should have been so unsure of himself with her.

Still, possibly it wasn't so surprising really, she reflected - not when she took into account the history of their relationship, and Clark's own lack of experience with relationships. He had had girlfriends before, but no serious relationships since he'd been at college; he had told her that after his powers had become fully

developed he had been afraid to get too close to anyone in case he gave away his secret. Lois was the first person to whom he had been tempted to tell all; but then she had fallen for his *alter ego* instead, which had made him reluctant to confide in her. She understood, although he hadn't voiced his inner fears, that a small part of him still doubted that she loved him for himself and not for his powers. It would have been surprising if he hadn't felt that way, she knew; although she had told Superman - not knowing that he was really Clark - that she had recovered from her infatuation with him and was in love with Clark, he had a lot of memories of her foolish behaviour around Superman. And, of course, it had been Superman with whom she had made love, not Clark.

Still, we have all the time in the world to make up for that, Lois thought dreamily. She had been surprised, and disappointed, that Clark hadn't seemed particularly impatient to renew their sexual relationship. She had even wondered, with some trepidation, whether he was put off by her pregnant body; her breasts were now very swollen and full, and her belly obviously rounded and large. But his behaviour hadn't suggested that at all; although they had yet to make love, Clark had been extremely loving and affectionate in his attentions. He seemed to love touching her stomach through her clothes - and on one occasion, they had lain together on her bed, with Lois in her underclothes and Clark wearing just a pair of shorts. He had pillowed his head on her breasts and simply gazed at her belly, allowing his hands to touch it, stroke it, caressing the mound and feeling with wonder the movements of their baby inside her womb. No, Clark evidently loved her body, and found the evidence of her pregnancy endlessly fascinating and attractive.

He *was* hugely attracted to her, she knew that beyond any doubt. Although she had yet to see him naked apart from the occasion on which he - as Superman - had taken a shower in her apartment, he had a beautiful body which she knew would be magnificent when aroused. And he was frequently aroused in her presence, and that fact was often wholly apparent to her, either because he was holding her close enough to him to allow her to feel the strength of his erection, or - as on the occasion on her bed - because the physical evidence of his arousal was visible through his clothing.

Clark wanted her, all right. So why hadn't he taken her? It hadn't been for lack of opportunity, or invitation. She raised her head and studied him; he had taken the tops off the various boxes and was examining the contents, apparently deep in thought. His brow was furrowed slightly in concentration; his gorgeous brown eyes were unobscured by glasses - it was a sign of their new relationship that he rarely wore them when they were alone together and unlikely to be interrupted - and his T-shirt moulded his upper body like a second skin. And his jeans, tightly moulded to his legs, covering his narrow hips and groin ... Lois forced herself to look away; any more and she would have been tearing at his zipper with her teeth! How had she ever managed to be in this man's company and *not* feel in a constant state of arousal?

She lay back on the sofa and allowed her mind to drift back to their first - and only - time. It often seemed like a dream to her now; it had been several months ago, of course, and it had been in the middle of the night, after long hours trying to warm Superman up and then reduce his fever, calm his delirious ramblings. It was hardly surprising that their lovemaking wasn't a clear picture in her mind.

It had consisted of slow but, contradictorily, impatient fumbling, touching, stroking, kissing, all beneath the bedclothes; his penetration of her, when it had happened, had been a truly natural consequence of their closeness, and they had climaxed soon after. She had never even wondered, at the time, whether Superman was in any way sexually experienced; his actions had appeared purely guided by instinct. At least, so she thought, looking back at her blurred memories.

But... Struck by a thought, Lois forced herself to consider. If she had no clear picture of their one time together, what must it be like for Clark? He had been ill that night; he hadn't even remembered that they had been together until he'd found his Super-suit in her apartment. When he'd told her that he finally remembered having been at her apartment, he'd said that his memories of what had occurred were extremely hazy. So... it was very possible that Clark hardly remembered making love at all.

And if that was the case... Lois reflected on what Clark had told her of his past. He had been a virgin - and up until just over a week ago he had believed that he still was. In many ways, he was a true innocent in the ways of men and women together - although he certainly needed no guidance in the art of kissing, she thought with a secret smile of enjoyment. It would probably not be surprising at all if Clark was nervous about being sexually intimate with her again, she thought. She knew that he was aware that she was experienced, had been even before their child had been conceived, and - knowing her Kansas farm-boy as she now did - he could easily be afraid that he would not be experienced or competent enough for her.

How could she let him know - without embarrassing him - that it wasn't technique she was looking for, but closeness and loving with the man she loved more than anything else in the world? That she felt privileged and honoured that this very wonderful and special man had waited, that she was his first lover, that she would have the right to teach him how to pleasure a woman, to guide him in the ways of loving?

Her lips curled in another secret smile. She would find a way - and Clark Kent had better make sure that he didn't wear himself out in his insistence on putting away her belongings this afternoon. She had plans for him later!

Lois's reflections were interrupted suddenly by the amused voice of her fiance. "Earth to Lois! Hey, you were nearly asleep there!"

No, I wasn't, Lois thought, but you're not going to know about that yet... "You wanted something, Clark?"

He smiled at her; a breathtaking flash of white teeth and that mobile mouth. "Yeah - just wanted to warn you that I'm going to be moving around pretty fast, so hang onto anything you don't want to blow away, okay?"

Lois leaned up on one elbow and raised an eyebrow at him. "Showing off again, are you, Flyboy?"

"Flyboy?" It was Clark's turn to raise an ironic eyebrow.

"Yeah... fits, doesn't it?"

He grinned. "Is this an alternative to Farmboy?"

"Could be - you like it?"

He crossed to her and deposited a swift kiss on her surprised lips.
"Maybe. I could get used to it, I guess."

Lois ruffled his hair before he withdrew. He looked so different like this; no glasses, unruly hair, casual clothing... and a new, more relaxed, air. This, she thought, is the real Clark Kent, whom only his parents had known... up until now. She smiled at the thought, then emitted a gasp of amazement as he suddenly shifted into high-speed mode. He became a blur of grey and blue denim as he sped around the apartment, removing items from the packing cases and putting them away in cupboards, shelves, wardrobes and anywhere he could find space, leaving a mini-whirlwind in his wake as he moved.

My God... and I bet Martha and Jonathan just take this for granted, Lois thought incredulously. She lay back on the sofa again as her mind drifted to Clark's parents and the kind, generous way in which they had welcomed her into the family. The day she and Clark had finally confided in each other, and discovered their mutual love, he had taken her to see his parents in Smallville. By Superman Express, of course; that had been quite a journey. It had been the longest flight she had ever taken with Superman, not that either of them had objected.

Clark had landed in the back yard of the Kent farmhouse, setting Lois carefully on her feet as he had done so. At the same moment, the back door of the house had shot open, and Martha and Jonathan had exited. They must have heard the whoosh of Clark arriving, Lois had surmised; at any rate, Martha had looked excited and had begun to say something which sounded like "Hi Cla - " Then she had stopped abruptly, glanced at Jonathan in bemusement, and begun again, this time more formally.

"Hello, Superman, Lois - what brings you two here?"

Clark had laughed aloud, a sound of pure joy. He had led Lois across the yard to where his parents stood, calling, "Hi, Mom, Dad - we thought we'd come to lunch."

Jonathan had stared, slack-jawed, at his son, while Martha had urged them all into the kitchen. Once inside, she had turned to Clark and said, "Lois knows?"

Before replying, Clark had spun back into his civilian clothes and glasses, a gesture which had answered her question more eloquently than any words could have. "Sure, Mom - it was time."

Lois, feeling that Clark was expecting his parents to assimilate rather too much information at once, had interjected. "It's okay, Mr and Mrs Kent, you don't have to worry. I'll never reveal Clark's secret - your secret."

Martha had smiled warmly. "Oh, we know that, honey - don't we, Jonathan? It's just that Clark never mentioned that he was thinking

of telling you."

Jonathan, recovering his composure, had added, "Sure we know, Lois. And I'm sure Clark had a good reason for telling you," he had finished, with a sidelong glance at his adopted son.

Sitting around the kitchen table a few minutes later, Clark had explained the reason for the visit. "We have some news for you both, and we wanted to tell you in person. Lois and I are going to be getting married."

Seeing the Kents glance at each other, Lois had interrupted before either had a chance to reply. "I love Clark, and just today I discovered that he loves me too - well, I guess I suspected, or hoped, for a long time that he did, but I was never really sure..."

"Oh, honey, of course he did!" Martha had interjected in laughing reassurance. "That boy has loved you since the day he met you!"

"Sure he has, Lois," Jonathan had added. "Never talked about anyone the way he talked about you. Half the time he couldn't think straight, after he went to Metropolis and met you."

Lois had glanced at Clark on hearing these testaments from his parents, and had been thrilled to see him looking embarrassed, but pleased. He had reached for her hand, and added, "So we'll be getting married as soon as possible."

"That's great news!" Martha had exclaimed. She had immediately got to her feet and hugged Lois, while Jonathan gripped his son's hand firmly. "Lois, welcome to the family," Clark's father had added.

"There's something else we need to tell you." Clark spoke again once the celebrations had died down.

"Yeah," Lois added awkwardly, looking at Martha. "I know it's going to sound as if I behaved terribly - and I know that you and Mr Kent haven't - "

"Martha and Jonathan, please, Lois," Martha had interrupted. "You're family now - you can't stand on ceremony."

"Martha," Lois had agreed, a little nervously. "Well, you see..." She had broken off as Clark had taken her hand comfortingly in his.

"Let me, Lois." He turned to his parents. "The baby Lois is carrying. It's mine."

Jonathan frowned slightly. "You mean you'll be adopting it? I should hope so, if you two are getting married."

"No, Dad, I mean I'm the baby's father - the biological father."

The Kents senior had stared at each other, then at Lois and Clark, in disbelief and puzzlement.

"But, Clark, surely you'd have known?" Martha objected, confused.

Clark shook his head. "Remember the night I stopped the asteroid, and I woke up not knowing how I'd got home"? His parents had nodded, listening attentively. "Well, I actually went to Lois's apartment - as Superman - and I was in a bad way, really cold, feverish, exhausted. She looked after me, got me warmed up, put me to bed, and looked after me when I got delirious. And... well, we made love. But when I woke up a few hours later I didn't remember what we'd done, and I went home - then I woke up in the morning at my place and didn't remember even being at Lois's at all. And she got pregnant... and because Superman didn't remember having been with her, she felt she couldn't tell him - me - what had happened."

Jonathan had shaken his head slowly, censoriously. "You slept with the girl, then crept out of her apartment without a word to her? I'd thought better of you, Clark."

"It wasn't his fault!" Lois had protested. "He wasn't well - he didn't remember."

"But Lois, honey, why didn't you tell him?" Martha asked, still frowning, trying to understand. "I know it must have been awkward, knowing he didn't remember, but he was going to become a father!"

"I know, and believe me, I spent months agonising over it," Lois had answered. "It was just - so difficult. I didn't know Superman was Clark, and I just thought, at first, that maybe he did remember and was trying to tell me he regretted it, and then I wasn't sure - but as time went past it was just so much harder to imagine telling him that he'd made me pregnant."

"You see, Mom, at the same time I was trying to distance Superman from Lois," Clark had interjected. "I really wanted Lois to get to know me for myself, without the Suit getting in the way, and it seemed more important once I knew she was pregnant and alone. So I kept away from her as Superman, and didn't really encourage conversation if I met her when I was wearing the Suit."

"I see," Martha had replied, smiling wryly. "Both of you, walking on eggshells around each other, afraid to tell each other what you both needed to know... it's no wonder it's taken you this long to discover you love each other!"

Lois had given Martha a curious look; Martha had laughed and replied, "Lois, honey, I could see you were half-way in love with Clark the very first time we met you. I was just so disappointed to find out that you seemed to be having a relationship with someone else."

Lois had reached for her future mother-in-law's hand. "And even with that, you were so kind and thoughtful - you've been far more understanding than my own mother, you know."

Later, Jonathan had enquired, with an amused expression, "And just how do you two plan on breaking the news to everyone else - especially people you've assured that Clark isn't the father?"

Lois and Clark's eyes had met, the same rueful grimace in each's expression. "We'll think of something, Dad," Clark had answered. "I thought I might leave it to Lois - she's pretty good at creative thinking."

Lois had stuck her tongue out at Clark. "Better than you, anyway, buster - some of those excuses you've used to go and be Superman have been pretty pathetic!"

"Well, in future I'll have you to help me, won't I?" he had answered airily.

Telling Ellen and Sam Lane hadn't been quite as simple, Lois reflected now as she continued to watch Clark - or what she could see of him - dashing about the apartment. They had decided to do it the day after their visit to Smallville, since they were still on their days off. Lois, trying to work out the least stressful way of doing it, had suggested visiting Ellen at her home, and telephoning her father afterwards. Clark, however, had assumed a thoughtful expression before replying. He had then given Lois a quirky smile as he spoke.

"I think it might be better if you ask them both to meet us together - maybe at your place."

She had stared at him. "You can't be serious, Clark - my mom and dad, *together*? You know what they're like!"

Nodding, he had smiled reassuringly at her. "Yep - that's why it's a good idea. Your mom'll be too busy blaming your father to pick on you, and your father will want to beat up on me. Which is fine by me - I can take it!"

Lois had stared at him in wonder; if she hadn't already realised just how special Clark Kent was, it was being brought home to her now. He was willing to face the wrath of her parents - particularly Sam Lane, not known for the calmness of his temper - and was even suggesting that he would allow himself to be used in order to deflect her parents' criticism away from her.

"Clark, I can't let you do that!" she had protested. "My mother is going to be mad enough as it is, considering the number of times I told her you weren't the father - Dad's likely to want to hit you!"

He had raised an eyebrow at her as he'd lounged against the worktop in his kitchen. "Think that's gonna worry me, Lois?"

She had blushed, remembering again that this man was far more than he appeared to be. "Well, just be careful - I suppose I don't want him winding up in the emergency room with a broken hand!"

Clark had laughed in genuine amusement. "No problem - remember, I'm well used to hiding my strength."

And Clark's suggestion had worked, even better than Lois had imagined it could. Her parents had arrived, separately, at her apartment a

couple of hours later. Clark had unobtrusively taken control of the situation - how could I ever have imagined him to be ineffectual, Lois had wondered - had encouraged her parents to sit together on one of the sofas and had served them with coffee before joining Lois on the other. He had then very obviously placed his arm around Lois's shoulder as he had explained that they had some news for the elder Lanes.

"We wanted to tell you that I'm the father of Lois's baby," he had announced calmly. Sam and Ellen had simply stared at the younger couple in shock for a long moment, before Ellen had raised her hand in protest.

"Now Lois, how many times did I ask you whether Clark here was responsible? And just how many times did you **lie** to me and tell me he wasn't? There may be a lot of things I'm disappointed about where you're concerned, Lois, but I never thought you'd deliberately lie to me!" Ellen's voice had grown increasingly shrill as she had reached the climax of her speech.

Before Lois could reply, her father had turned to his ex-wife. "Ellen, can't you see our Princess is upset? If anyone's to blame here, it's this young man who is clearly incapable of facing up to his responsibilities."

Clark had got to his feet at this point, still keeping a hand on Lois's shoulder. "The other thing we wanted to tell you is that Lois and I will be getting married, as soon as I can arrange a ceremony and my parents can get to Metropolis."

Only slightly mollified, Sam Lane had replied gruffly, "Better late than never, I suppose, Kent." He had paused briefly before adding, "And what took you so long, may I ask?"

Lois, annoyed that Clark's behaviour seemed to be the only issue in this discussion, had interrupted before Clark could respond. "It's not Clark's fault, Dad. He only found out it was his baby yesterday."

"Oh really?" Ellen had replied sarcastically. "You mean no-one had told him how babies were made? What did he expect might happen after he had... you know... with you?"

Flushing, Lois had glared at her mother. "He was **ill** - I stayed with him to look after him, that's when it happened. He had a fever, and he just didn't remember anything the next day."

Raising his eyebrows, Sam had glanced at Clark before speaking. "What was wrong with you?"

Clark had shrugged. "I got caught out in a storm - when Lois found me, I was freezing cold, wet, delirious and feverish. She tried to warm me up, but I was still shivering, and so she lay next to me to keep me warm."

Sam nodded. "The symptoms add up. It's quite plausible that he mightn't have remembered anything the next day, Ellen."

However, Ellen Lane was not to be denied her anger so easily. "And why didn't you say anything, Lois? You just let that man off

scot-free!"

"Oh, Mother!" Lois had protested wearily. "It just wasn't like that. Clark and I were friends at the time, and I wasn't sure I wanted anything more. So when I realised he didn't remember, I decided not to tell him what had happened. As far as I was concerned, it was just a one-off, nothing more - but then I realised I was pregnant."

Clark had then returned to sit by Lois. "And she didn't say anything then because she didn't want me to feel obligated to become involved with her just because I'd made her pregnant. But I wanted to help her with the baby anyway, which I guess told her that I wouldn't exactly mind becoming a father - and we gradually realised that we were falling in love, baby or no baby." Meeting his future parents-in-law's eyes, Clark had continued. "For me, the only barrier to asking Lois to marry me months ago was not knowing who the baby's father was..." he had allowed his hand to rest on her stomach before continuing, "... it really didn't bother me that she was having another man's child. I was just afraid that one day she was going to go back to him, whoever he was."

Lois had turned to give Clark a reassuring smile; the sincerity in his voice had told her that he had been speaking the truth about his feelings. She knew that he would have married her regardless of whose child she was carrying; but she had never realised that he had been so anxious about her own intentions. Squeezing his hand then, she had faced her parents again. "It took me a few months to realise that I wanted to be with Clark, and for us to be a family - but then I had to work out exactly how to tell him that I'd been carrying his baby for six months and never said a word. That wasn't easy - but then, Clark is a pretty special guy, and he understood."

"Why did you lie to me about it?" Ellen had protested yet again, only to be interrupted by Sam.

"Think about it, Ellen - if Lois hadn't told Clark he was the father, how could she have told anyone else? Of course she had to lie about it!" Sam had stood then, and had crossed towards Lois and Clark. Clark had also risen, and had been surprised to be offered the hand of his future father-in-law.

"Clark, I've liked you since the day we met, and I'm delighted that you're marrying my daughter. I know you'll look after her and my grandchild." Lois had been amazed to discover tears springing to her eyes as she had watched Sam and Clark embrace. She had been further shocked to find herself hugged by a weeping Ellen.

So the Lanes senior had taken the news pretty well, all told, Lois thought now. Clark had been correct in his suggestion of how to handle Lois's parents, and since then Ellen had been effusive in her praise for 'that wonderful future son-in-law of mine'. Lois made a mental note to ensure that Clark accompanied her on all future visits to her mother's home...

Clark returned to the living-room some time later, having unpacked the last of Lois's clothes and arranged her toiletries in his bathroom. He wondered what it would be like sharing his apartment

with her; while on the one hand he was extremely excited at the prospect, there was some trepidation as well. Quite apart from the sexual part of their relationship, he had never shared his bed with anyone before; that would certainly be strange, as would having another person sharing his personal living space. And it wouldn't be just the two of them for very long, of course; in only two months there would be a baby as well... Maybe we ought to start looking for a house, he thought, his brow furrowed as he considered the financial implications.

And there was his other job... was he going to find it as easy to fly off and be Superman, now that he had a live-in fiancee - soon to be wife? Oh, he was aware that Lois would never try to prevent him doing what he needed to do, but would he want to leave her? What if... he closed his eyes briefly as he felt his body tighten once more - what if he heard a cry for help when they were in the throes of making love? Could he bear to leave Lois? Could he ever ignore someone in need of Superman?

Lois would tell me I'm obsessing, he reflected wryly as he glanced over to where she lay on the sofa. He smiled suddenly; she was asleep. Or at least seemed to be; she was still, and her eyes were closed. He stilled; he was aware that he tended to fuss over her, but he did wish she would rest more. Not wanting to disturb her, he drifted a few inches off the floor and floated back into the bedroom.

Lois opened her eyes a few minutes later to find herself alone, and the packing cases and boxes gone. She glanced around, and noticed a number of familiar ornaments, photographs, books and other objects arranged on shelves and other places in the room. Trust Clark, she thought, making sure that I feel at home...

Speaking of Clark, where was he? She slowly got to her feet and walked towards the kitchen, then realised she could hear the sound of running water. She veered off towards Clark's bedroom, just in time to see Clark emerge from the bathroom which opened off it, wearing only a short towel draped around his waist. She drew in a sharp breath at the sight of him, water dripping from his hair and running down his chest and legs; she felt an urgent need to stroke his hard, muscular chest and strong thighs. But Clark had heard her... damn his super-hearing, she thought wryly. He glanced across at her and smiled, the movement causing his beautiful eyes to crinkle at the corners.

"You're awake then? I thought I'd leave you to rest."

"I wasn't asleep," she replied softly, a little shyly; it seemed strange to be in Clark's bedroom with him in such a state of undress. It's crazy, she told herself. We're engaged, we've just moved in together, and we're expecting a baby together - and I'm still shy with him...

She hesitated; would he want his privacy? Should she leave? He solved the dilemma for her by crossing the room and bending to capture her lips in a warm, loving kiss. "I missed you," he whispered against her lips.

"I missed you, too, honey," she assured him sweetly, wrapping her arms around his damp body to pull him closer to her. He resisted, protesting that he was wet; unsure whether she should press the issue at this point, Lois released him. After all, she admitted, perhaps he felt at a disadvantage, as he was almost naked and she was fully dressed.

"Want me to wait outside?" she offered.

He grinned and shook his head. For a moment Lois was unsure how to take this: was he inviting intimacy at last? But his words showed that this wasn't the case. "No need - it'll take me less than a second to get ready."

He darted around the room at Super-speed, and as he'd promised, was almost immediately standing in front of her fully dressed, with his hair neatly combed.

"Wow! I can see you don't take long to get ready in the mornings!" Lois exclaimed, laughing. "Wait until you see how long I need!"

Laughing with her, Clark steered her back to the kitchen. "No problem - I can make breakfast while you shower and dress."

"Don't forget my make-up," she pointed out. "That's at least another fifteen minutes."

"Doesn't bother me - it means I can lie in bed and admire you as you get dressed," he suggested, seeming very pleased at the prospect.

"Not fair!" she protested, trying with difficulty to suppress a smile. "You get ready so quickly I can't see anything!"

"Well, maybe I'll slow down occasionally..." he murmured, the warmth in his eyes making his appreciation of the idea obvious. "Now, what would you like to eat? Anything at all - you name it."

Lois considered. Chinese was out of the question for the time being, much as she loved it; she didn't feel like pizza; and Indian food gave her indigestion at the moment. "I know - pasta!" she decided.

"Fine - why don't you set the table, and I'll be right back?"

As Clark spun into his Superman costume, Lois stared at him in surprise. "Where are you going?"

"Rome, of course." With that, he had stepped out onto the balcony and was gone. Lois stared at the space which he had occupied only seconds earlier and shook her head in disbelief. This was going to take some getting used to - a fiance who could travel anywhere in the world in minutes, even just for a takeaway meal.

But she had been left with a task, and she set her mind to creating the most romantic setting of which she was capable. She intended that, like it or not, her fiance was going to find himself seduced later that evening.

Flying east over the Atlantic Ocean, Clark was very grateful for the cold winds which played over his body. Lois's appearance in his bedroom as he'd emerged from the bathroom had almost been his undoing; he had heard her low gasp and noticed the arousal in her eyes as she'd gazed at him. He'd had to back away from her quickly before she'd got unmistakable evidence of his own arousal; the towel had almost parted company with his lower body.

And yet... it would have been the perfect opportunity to make love, he admitted. So why hadn't he taken advantage of the situation? It was clear that Lois wanted him every bit as much as he did her, and he was aware that she was growing more impatient, and was also puzzled - perhaps even hurt - at his failure to re-consummate their relationship. Yet it was partly Lois's eagerness which made Clark reluctant, he was aware. He still felt unsure, afraid that she would find him disappointing.

Yet he loved Lois; loved every inch of her body. He was still revelling in his new-found freedom to touch and caress her, and even just to sit and stare at her for minutes on end. He still hadn't told her that the night after they had settled everything between them, when he had supposedly gone home, he had spent several hours floating above her apartment building, simply listening to the sound of her heartbeat and, every so often, using his Super-vision to watch her as she slept. He wouldn't have to do that any more...

And she loved him touching her. That evening when they had lain together on her bed... He had flown back from his assignment in Canada for a brief visit, and they had been reclining on the sofa in her apartment, Lois's legs across his knees, just touching and gently stroking each other. He had rested his hand on her stomach, feeling the little movements as the baby shifted in her womb, an expression of pure pleasure on his face. Lois had caught his eye and asked what he was thinking; caught off guard, he had simply told her the truth, that he had been wishing he could look at her, at the evidence of her pregnancy, without the barrier of clothes. She had caught her breath momentarily and given him a wide-eyed stare; recovering swiftly, she had grinned, made a motion as if adjusting spectacles, and observed dryly that he should have no difficulty in doing that if he wanted to.

Clark had hastened to assure her that he would never dream of using his abilities to take advantage of her; she had placed her index finger across his lips and replied that she knew that. Standing, she had taken his hand; as he had also got to his feet, she had led him silently towards her bedroom.

Catching his breath, Clark had wondered briefly whether this was to be *it*; was she expecting him to make love to her? He knew he wanted to, but his fears and apprehensions remained. He had stood near the doorway as Lois had opened the buttons, one by one, on her maternity dress, and allowed it to fall in a pool at her feet. She had stood straight and proud in front of him, dressed only in her bra and panties, with her rounded belly prominent.

Feeling immensely privileged, Clark had slowly moved towards her and had reverently placed his hand upon her stomach. She had covered it with her own briefly, before backing away to sit on the bed. She had

reached for her bra, with the comment that her breasts were heavy and it hurt to have them confined when she was relaxing. He had gasped as she had removed the cotton garment to reveal the small but full globes, rose-tinted nipples standing proud. Clark had wanted, very much, to stretch his hand out and cup them, but had almost felt frozen to the spot.

He had watched her lie down on the bed, and then had heard her voice, as if from a long distance away, asking whether he intended to join her. Gulping, he had taken the necessary few steps forward, and made as if to sit on the bed.

"Uh-uh," she had tutted at him. "Not fair - you still have all your clothes on."

His jaw had almost dropped; slowly, wordlessly, he had reached for his T-shirt to pull it over his head, then had undone the zipper on his jeans. Stepping out of them, he had stood before her in his undershorts, nervous but longing to be close to her.

He had realised then, as he'd joined her on the bed, that he simply wanted to look and to touch; to rejoice in their freedom to be together; to grow accustomed to each other's bodies. He had told her this, hesitantly, unsure whether she would feel let down; but she had reached across to kiss him very gently and lovingly.

"I want to look at you, and touch you, too," she had whispered. "There's all the time in the world for anything else we might want to do."

He had spent seemingly endless minutes leaning up on his elbow simply looking at her, trailing a finger along her jawline, down her breastbone, between her breasts, over her belly. Some time later, he wasn't sure how it had happened, he had ended up lying with his head on her soft, warm breasts, gazing at her stomach and watching the gentle ripples as the restless baby shifted about. As he'd concentrated on her, and the baby, he had become aware that he was able to hear two heartbeats; stunned and delighted at this discovery, he had told Lois, who had marvelled at this extension of his abilities.

The experience had been intensely erotic, Clark reflected as his flight-path took him across southern France and towards the Mediterranean. He was aware that he had been sexually aroused, and he was sure that Lois had noticed; her own arousal had been apparent from her erect nipples. Whether they would have taken things further had remained an abstract question, however, as some time later he had overheard a news bulletin on a TV in a neighbouring apartment, and had reluctantly decided that he had to leave to be Superman.

So... now he and Lois were living together, and he had to face his fears some time very soon. Would tonight be the right time, or should he allow her to get some much-needed rest? Although his Super-powers had meant that the task of moving Lois into his apartment had been very easy and she hadn't had to do much of the work herself, he was aware that moving home was a stressful experience. Should he wait? Or was he simply attempting to postpone the inevitable again? Would he be able to lie in bed with Lois and not attempt to make love with her?

He returned to his apartment to find the place in near-darkness; two candles burned on the kitchen table, but Lois was nowhere to be seen. Resisting the temptation to use his Super-vision to find her, Clark placed their meal in the oven to keep warm, and spun back into his normal clothes. Suddenly, soft romantic music filled the apartment: the haunting sounds of Enya, a particular favourite of his. He spun around to see Lois emerging from the living-room, dressed in a soft, clingy gown which accentuated the curves of her lovely body. Again, he felt himself harden, and he gritted his teeth; he was behaving like a teenager!

She crossed the room silently and stopped in front of him; he noticed that she seemed less tall than usual, and glanced down to see that she was barefoot. For some reason, that excited him even more, and he blinked and swallowed in an attempt to get his responses under control. However, Lois wasn't about to make it easy for him; she trailed the back of her hand along his jawbone and down the strong column of his throat, while her body pressed up against his. With a long, ragged sigh, he placed his hands on her waist and lifted her so that her hips were cradled against his and his erection pressed into her groin.

"Oh God, Clark, that feels good!" she breathed against his throat. Her tongue flicked out and trailed across his Adam's apple. He groaned, and bent his head to kiss her, a deep, passionate kiss which left her in no doubt that he wanted her. She had set this up, of course: the romantic atmosphere, the sexy dress, the assault on his senses. A voice inside his head ordered him to sweep her up in his arms and make for the bedroom; for a moment he was tempted to obey.

But then he hesitated; she had arranged this, so perhaps he should let her take the lead, rather than ruin whatever plans she may have prepared for him. He ended the kiss and lowered her to the floor, then gestured at the table. "This looks really special, Lois - thank you."

She smiled, a mysterious smile containing a depth of promise. "Well, it's our first evening living together - I thought we should celebrate." She gestured at the fridge. "I put a bottle of wine in there, but it's probably not had long enough to chill."

"No problem." Relieved to have a practical task on which to concentrate, Clark extracted the bottle and blew on it with his freezing breath; within seconds it was almost ice-cold. "There you go - express service."

They ate; it was more of an erotic experience than a meal, Clark thought. Lois had known what she was doing when she'd asked for penne pasta; she fed him from her own fork, and encouraged him to do the same for her. They shared the wine, although she of course only drank one glass. When their plates were empty, she pulled herself to her feet and stood by his chair. "Dance with me, Clark?"

The music was still playing; she must have put the CD on repeat, Clark realised. He stood, took her in his arms and began to drift around the kitchen with her. Drawing her closer to him, on an impulse he drifted them upwards and continued to waltz with her in the air.

Realising that her feet were no longer touching the floor, Lois gasped and stared at Clark. It seemed that no matter what she had planned, how carefully she had determined her strategy, he was still capable of surprising her. He caught her eye and grinned. "This is real dancing, honey," he murmured in gentle amusement.

"I'll have to remember that," she laughed in return, clinging to his shoulders even though she was well aware that he would never drop her.

Some time later, he drifted them down to the floor again and asked whether she wanted coffee. Lois shook her head. "There's only one thing I want, Clark Kent."

"What's that?" he asked. She didn't reply; she simply took his hand and walked towards the bedroom, blowing out the candles as they went past the table.

Nervously, Clark stood facing Lois beside the double bed. "Are you sure you're not too tired for this?"

"I'm not tired at all," she assured him. "Are you sure you're not too busy? No rescues to dash to, no disasters to avert?"

He shook his head, determined about this at any rate. "Superman can have a night off, if you're sure this is what you want."

"Clark, this is what I have wanted since we decided to get married - if I'm honest, since long before that, even," she assured him. "I love you, I'm going to marry you - I'm having your baby! And I want, more than anything in the world, to make love with you."

"Me too," he replied, so quietly Lois could barely hear him. "But I can't help... Lois, I know we've done this before, but I hardly remember... I'm just - scared - I won't know how to please you." He looked away, reluctant to meet her eyes; his gaze fell to the floor briefly before flickering back to her, then away again.

But she had no intention of allowing him to retreat into his insecurities. "Clark, I want *you*. And let me assure you, last time you - pleased - me very much. This time, I want us to discover how we can please each other."

He nodded, accepting her assurances and came closer to her, claiming her lips in a fierce kiss. His hands went to the straps of her dress. "May I?" he whispered. She nodded, and he gently, reverently peeled the dress away from her body. She wasn't wearing a bra; his body was quicker to respond to that discovery than his brain.

"Follow your impulses, Clark," Lois whispered to him. He hesitated momentarily, then lowered his head to kiss the swell of her breast. She cradled his head with her hands, encouraging him to continue; thus emboldened, he allowed his tongue to dart out and lick her nipple. He felt his erection swell even further as her nipple hardened under his touch, and he raised his head to gaze at her.

"Do you like that?" he asked in a husky whisper.

"What do you think?" she asked him. "You can tell by the way my body responds to you, can't you?"

He nodded, then a further impulse made him take her small hand in his larger one. "Feel how my body responds to you," he whispered, pressing her palm against his crotch. She surprised and delighted him by rubbing the base of her palm down his swollen erection, then cupping his balls lightly before dragging her fingers back up along the line of his zipper, which covered his straining penis.

He swallowed, and stepped back. "Let me get undressed."

Fumbling awkwardly in a manner to which he was not accustomed, Clark removed his clothes until he stood before her in his shorts; they strained at the front against the pressure of his erection. Kneeling in front of him, Lois slipped her fingers inside the elasticated waist of his shorts and deliberately drew them down over his burgeoning erection, past his hips, to let them rest on the floor. He raised one foot and then the other to step out of them, then returned his gaze to Lois, who was still kneeling. She traced the length of his penis with her fingertips; he felt as if his entire body was throbbing with the sensation of her touch. He longed to pull her to her feet and bury himself inside her, but he forced himself to wait, to see what she intended to do.

He didn't have to wait long; she bent her head towards him and her tongue flicked out again, this time touching the shaft of his penis with the tip. He shuddered and groaned aloud, clenching his fists with the effort of preventing himself from grabbing her, forcing her to take all of him in her mouth. Would she touch him again?

She leaned back and smiled up at him, appearing to be satisfied with what she saw in his expression. Her head lowered again; her tongue appeared again; he tensed. This time, the full length of her tongue rasped along his full shaft, circled the tip, and trailed back along the other side of his erection before tasting his balls.

"Loisssss - oh, that is *so* good!" he moaned, the exquisite torture he was feeling revealed in his expression.

She smiled up at him again. "Just wait - it gets better."

She caught his hands and indicated that she wanted him to help her to her feet; willingly, he raised her. Standing before him, she took his hands and placed them on the waistband of her underwear. Clark understood: it was his turn. He carefully slid the garment down, kneeling to lift her feet one by one to free them.

He had seen pictures of naked women - even pregnant naked women - so the sight of Lois without any clothes should not have disturbed him too much. But he had to catch his breath: to him, she was just so perfect. He said so, softly; she gave a little embarrassed laugh.

"Clark... I'm nearly seven months pregnant, I have stretch marks and my breasts are huge!"

He shook his head. "You are beautiful. And I love looking at your belly - stretch marks and all - because the life you and I made

together is in there, and that is beautiful." He gazed deeply into her eyes. "Lois, I would not want to change one single inch of you."

Tears shimmered in her eyes at this; once again Clark Kent had managed to catch her off-balance, Lois thought.

"Oh, God, Clark - I had this all planned, you know, I was going to seduce you and show you just how much I want you... and then you go and say something like that." She blinked away one escaping tear. "I wonder just who's seducing who here?"

Still kneeling at her feet, Clark continued to hold her gaze, his voice husky with desire. "We both are."

"Oh, Clark - you don't know how much I wish I'd waited for you!" she exclaimed wistfully. "When I think of the - the disasters my previous relationships were... I just wish the time we made our baby had been my first time too."

Clark's expression was sincere and loving. "I'm not sorry. You are what your life experiences have made you, and I've told you, I would not change one thing about you. I love you for what you are today, and what you will be tomorrow."

Deeply moved, Lois reached down and caught his hand, squeezing it tightly. He returned the gesture gently, careful not to hurt her. Then he placed his hands on her hips and held her steadily while he lowered his head to her groin. She jerked as she felt the first touch of his tongue between her legs; she wriggled a little in order to part her legs further. To her amazement, he unerringly found his way to her clitoris, and she squealed as his tongue rasped over it, making it erect.

"Clark... *oh*! How did you... oh God!" she gasped. He continued his task for several moments more, Lois encouraging him with little cries and jerky movements, before squatting back on his heels and looking up at her.

"I may not have had practical experience, but I have read a few books..." he explained, getting to his feet. Reassured by what he saw in Lois's eyes, he suddenly scooped her up in his arms and carried her to the bed.

Lying beside her and worshipping her with his hands, he whispered, his tone husky but concerned, "Lois - my love - I want to make love to you, but it is safe for the baby?"

She reached for him, reassuring with her touch as well as her words. "Yes, it's fine. Just don't put your weight on top of me."

He shook his head, his voice a whisper. "I don't need to do that - I can float, if you want."

Feeling impatient regardless of her original determination to take this as slowly as necessary for Clark's sake, she pulled his mouth down on hers again and instigated a passionate kiss; Clark responded with all of the love which he felt for her. Lying next to her on the bed, his body pressed up against hers, he felt an urgency building inside him which was demanding to be satisfied.

"Help me, Lois," he whispered.

She parted her legs, encouraging him to kneel upright in front of her, then took his shaft firmly in her small hand, guiding it to her hot, pulsing centre. Clark gasped as his sensitive tip came into intimate contact with her body, and he had to fight the driving urge to thrust forward, since he didn't want to hurt her. But Lois wouldn't allow him to pull back, using her thighs to urge him closer still. She took him inside her, emitting a sigh of immense pleasure as he came to rest fully within her.

It seemed to Clark later as if their lovemaking had taken on a dream-like quality; soft-focus, slow movements of hands and bodies, low-voiced murmurs, sighs of pleasure and ecstasy. In his mind, this lovemaking almost became merged with their previous encounter; his vivid dreams of making love to Lois came alive again and met with the reality of this occasion.

Afterwards, he recognised that there could be no question about whether he had satisfied her; she lay exhausted on the bed, a blissful smile on her face and love in her eyes for him. Clark too felt a lassitude he had never before experienced; he reflected that it was just as well he wasn't needed for an emergency, as he wasn't sure he would have been able to fly right at that moment. Lying beside Lois, watching her rest, his hand trailing gently over her body, he felt that he couldn't imagine a greater sense of joy - unless it was when they held their child for the first time.

Later, idly stroking Lois's hair as she lay asleep, curled up against him, Clark's mouth was still curved in a blissful smile as he considered that he couldn't remember when he'd been happier than at this moment. Although, he reflected, the moment when he'd realised that Lois loved **him**, not Superman, came a close second. He didn't count his discovery that her baby was his, because his emotions on discovering that fact had been so mixed... His mind drifted back to that morning a little over a week ago.

He had awakened on that morning feeling full of hope. His visit to Lois's apartment the previous evening had resulted in a romantic interlude he had never expected to happen. He had started out simply by massaging her back and calves because she was suffering from cramp, but he had glanced up during the latter task to find her eyes fixed on him, an unmistakable expression burning in the chocolate-brown gaze. It had been desire - even Clark was not so inexperienced that he hadn't realised that. She had been aroused, and he had suddenly become aware of the sexual tension in the atmosphere. He hadn't been able to prevent himself returning her gaze and letting her know that he shared her need.

And what had happened next had seemed so natural, so straightforward. The touch of Lois's fingers on his face had almost swept away the control he had held onto so fiercely while he'd been stroking and massaging her aching legs. As she'd leaned closer to him, it had seemed the obvious thing to do to move closer to her and to slide his shaking fingers along her jaw and into her hair. And to lower his head to hers and kiss her... That kiss had seemed to embody the properties of an electrical charge; it had been the most erotic experience of his life. And Lois had responded so openly, so warmly, there had been no way Clark could not have realised how much she

wanted him to continue the embrace. And he had wanted to, so much... He had raised her body and brought her to sit on his lap, so that he could hold her closer to him; she had certainly not objected to the greater intimacy this had afforded.

And the sheer sensation of Lois's body half-lying across his lap... Clark had felt his erection straining against his trousers, and had worried for a moment that his arousal would be obvious to Lois and that she would be put off by his reaction to her. But she had simply burrowed closer to him, as close as her pregnant belly had allowed her, and deepened the kiss still further.

If Clark hadn't realised that her fingers had begun to trace the buttons on his shirt and been afraid that she would discover the Super-suit underneath, who knew what might have happened. Well, okay, he conceded, if she'd found the Suit he knew very well what would have happened: all intimacy would have come to a shuddering halt while Lois demanded the truth about his identity. If he *hadn't* been wearing the Suit... Reflecting on the sequence of events the morning after, Clark had felt that it was a strong possibility that they could have ended up in bed.

Lois hadn't wanted him to stop: the betraying hurt in her chocolate eyes had told him so all too clearly. He had been so tempted to throw caution to the wind and reach for her again; but his brain had over-ruled the impulse of his body. He *needed* to tell her the truth about Superman, and tell her that he loved her and wanted to be with her. Then, if she still wanted to...

So that had been his aim when he'd set off to her apartment that morning. He'd been quite optimistic, as well. Their relationship had undergone a lot of ups and downs over the past six months or so, but finally they were making definite progress. Lois's pregnancy had certainly brought them closer, but it seemed that each time they took a couple of steps forward, fate had stepped in and forced them to take a large step back. There had been that evening when Lois had allowed him to feel her baby's movements as they'd sat alone in the Planet offices; there had been a real *connection* between them at that moment, and when Lois had invited Clark to come back to her place and talk, he had believed that he might at last have his opportunity to tell her how he felt. But then Superman had been needed...

Superman, the phantom third party in their relationship, had managed to get in the way on a number of occasions, Clark reflected now as he lay watching Lois sleep. Although, of course, if it hadn't been for Superman, he probably would not be engaged to Lois and eagerly awaiting the birth of their first child. He allowed his eyes to close as memories from that fateful morning again rushed into his mind.

He had arrived at her apartment to find her pleased to see him, but also nervous, which had mirrored his own feelings. They had behaved a little skittishly around each other, sharing a kiss but immediately breaking away to change the subject; after a time, the conversation had returned to the previous evening. Clark, knowing that he had secrets to share, had been hesitant, nervous; but strangely, so had Lois. When she had suggested going for a walk, therefore, he had been happy to agree; perhaps out in the open they might be able to relax with each other again, away from the air of tension in her apartment.

Of course, he had realised that he wouldn't be able to tell her the truth about Superman if they were in a public place, but he had thought he might be able to find a way around that.

So he had agreed, but his concern for Lois had led him to offer to fetch her a sweater, and he had followed her instructions as to where the one he had lent her was kept. Clark's breathing stilled as he remembered the moment when he had pulled open the drawer. Oh, the sweater had been there, all right, but he had also seen a flash of red... a very distinctive shade of red. He had pulled out the sweater and reached in, with a shaking hand, to touch what lay underneath. It was one of his Suits, of course; he would recognise the feel of the fabric anywhere even without examining the item. However, he had pulled it out of the drawer just as Lois had silently entered the bedroom behind her. He had recognised just *which* suit it was instantly: there was a slight tear in the back of the cape which he'd meant to ask his mother to repair. This was the suit he'd worn the night he'd stopped the asteroid; the one he had thought was lost.

As he'd tried to figure out what on earth it was doing in Lois's bottom drawer, he had become aware of her presence. The shock on her face had nearly given him all the answers he had wanted, but he had needed to hear it from her. So he had asked, and she had told him some of the truth: Superman had come to her apartment, ill and frozen, and she had looked after him; he had left some time during the night and subsequently seemed to have no recollection of having been there.

But I do remember... or at least I did in my dreams, Clark had realised as he'd listened to Lois's explanation. It had all been too much to take in; there were so many possible implications following what he had just discovered. He had *had* to leave, to give himself time to let it all sink in. He hadn't even stopped to think about how Lois might feel if Clark simply walked out after learning that Superman had spent the night with her...

He had simply launched himself into the sky, barely aware of where he was or of his surroundings. His dreams had forced themselves into his conscious thoughts as he had flown: that recurring dream he had had over the past few months, of he and Lois making passionate love. It seemed that it hadn't been a dream after all, but a memory... and once he had accepted that, the rest of the memories came flooding back. He remembered desperately trying to reach Lois, flying weakly against a fierce wind and biting rain. He remembered her concern, the blanket she'd wrapped around him, her insistent urging that he should take a shower, her slight body supporting him on the way into the bathroom, her tiny hands pulling at the fastenings of his suit to help him undress. Her thinly-clad body sliding into the shower beside him, to prop him upright and ensure that the warm water could have its healing effect on him. Later, her sweet-smelling body slipping into the bed beside him, and holding him to keep him warm when he'd been feverish... and later still, the kisses, the caresses, and the soft shedding of clothing. He had slid his body over hers and entered her as if he'd always known the steps of this intricate dance of lovemaking.

He had been Lois's secret lover... and did that therefore mean that he had fathered her child? Had she been carrying his child all this time, and never said a word?

If he was... the realisation was almost a physical pain. Not that he objected to being a father - after all, he had been hoping to suggest to Lois that they live together, or marry, whichever she would agree to, and that he could help her raise her baby. He would even have asked if he could adopt it. But after all this time, being with Lois and supporting her through her pregnancy, at the same time trying to hide his feelings of jealousy over the man who had made her pregnant - only now to discover that it had been **himself**! And even worse - that **he** had almost consigned Lois to single parenthood. He - and probably no-one else, he realised - had known how much the prospect of bringing up a baby alone had bothered Lois. And he had been so angry with the mysterious ex-lover who had abandoned her to that fate.

He had probably been that 'deadbeat dad' all along! It seemed that Ellen Lane had been right...

Without stopping to think any further, Clark had changed course and flown straight for Lois's window. She had obviously heard him, and moments later she had walked into the living-room; to his surprise, she had seemed reluctant to welcome him. He hadn't stopped to think about that, however, simply demanding the answer to his question.

Was he the father of her child?

The expression on her face had answered him more eloquently than words, and he had felt weakened, in agony, as if someone had stabbed him through the heart with Kryptonite. He had made her pregnant, and then left her to bear the responsibility alone...His anger and frustration with himself had made him abrupt with her as he had asked why she hadn't told him. Had she thought he wouldn't believe her? Surely she knew that he would **never** have abandoned her if he'd known the truth!

He had almost lost control of his emotions as he'd alternately chided her for not telling him and assured her that he would have taken care of her, been there for her in every possible way, if only she had told him. He had felt even more self-loathing as he had realised that it had been his own behaviour, in distancing himself from her as Superman so that he could try to get closer to her as Clark, which had made her more reluctant to confide in him. But recriminations were fruitless, he had realised, and so he had tried to move the conversation along, assuring her that now that he knew, he would look after her and they would take care of their baby together.

When Lois's expression had altered so completely and she had then turned away from him, it was as if she had slapped him hard in the face. She had begun to explain that he was not what she wanted or needed as a partner and the father of her child - oh, she would never deny him access rights, but **she** didn't want him, didn't love him. It seemed that one minute he had been trying to get used to the idea that he was going to be a **father** in a couple of months' time, that he had actually made love with the woman he loved so much; the next, she was slamming the door in his face.

The realisation that he would not after all be able to have what he had wanted so much, what he had thought he was so close to achieving, had blurred his vision and his comprehension. It had been a moment or two before he had caught the drift of her next words.

She was talking about someone who *had* been there for her all along, someone she felt comfortable with, someone who had done all the things for her that *he,* the father, should have the right to do. But... Clark had tried to clear his befuddled brain: he *had* been there for her, all along; he just hadn't known it was his baby. He had then been struck with shock on hearing her next words.

Clark would make a great father... Clark loves me, I think...

She was talking about *him*... but surely she realised... Clark had tensed again as he'd remembered that of course he was here as Superman, and Lois still didn't know he was Clark. He'd been about to interrupt, but her next words had taken the breath away from his body.

"Clark's a man in a billion. I am incredibly lucky to have him. I now know I love him. And I want to ask him to marry me and to bring up my child as his own."

She loves Clark... she loves Clark... *not* Superman! The realisation had hit Clark like a shot of adrenaline, and he had wanted to rush to her, to seize her in his arms and tell her, over and over, how much he loved her. After all this time, the long months of thinking that, no matter how much he loved Lois, she saw him only as a friend, a shoulder to lean on; believing that she loved someone else, and that she was only ever likely to want him in his guise as Superman... he could barely take in the impact of her words. She loved *him.* But she was still speaking, explaining how they could manage, how Superman could visit his child; the raw emotion in her voice as she had struggled to choke back tears, had almost been Clark's undoing.

He had needed to tell her, immediately; perhaps it would be easier if he showed her, he had thought, silently spinning so that he stood dressed in his normal clothes, though he had left his hair in its Superman style and - an afterthought - he had placed his glasses in his shirt pocket. When he had finally persuaded her to turn around, her shock had been visible.

But, knowing that Lois loved him and that she wanted them to be together, Clark had no longer been afraid of her reaction to this discovery. They had talked - for a moment, she had been angry, but that hadn't lasted; and she had accepted him for all that he was. She had even, to his amazement, had some amazing insights into the Kryptonian part of himself, things which had never occurred to him, or which he had simply taken for granted without questioning. Even if he hadn't already known that Lois Lane was an incredibly special woman, that discussion would have shown it for a certainty.

Feeling Lois shift against him in the bed as she moved in her sleep, Clark caressed her with his eyes once again. She was beautiful, desirable, sexy, and gorgeously pregnant with his baby. And she desired him, too... life could not get much better, he felt, as drowsiness began to take over.

"Good morning, honey."

Lois slowly surfaced from her dream, in which she was being held in a

warm, loving embrace by a tall, dark and extremely handsome male, to see Clark bending over her. He was fully dressed for work, and held a mug of coffee.

"G'morning... what time is it?" she asked sleepily, stretching in a lazy movement.

"Seven-thirty - I let you sleep as long as I could," he replied with an amused grin.

"What?! I have to get up - I'll be late for work!" She sat up as abruptly as she could manage in the circumstances.

"No you won't - I called in and said we had an appointment first and would be in after that," Clark answered with a smile, coming to sit on the edge of the bed.

"What appointment?" Lois enquired suspiciously.

"Well, I called the jeweller yesterday and he said your ring is ready, so I thought we might like to go and pick it up first."

Lois's lips curved into a delighted smile. "I'd love to."

"So - are we ready to announce our engagement today?" Clark asked. They had said nothing at the Planet so far, although Lois suspected that Perry White at least had probably guessed that she and Clark were now an item. Clark had wanted to wait until the engagement ring he and Lois had chosen was ready; it had had to be altered to fit her slim finger, and would probably need further alteration once she had returned to her pre-pregnancy weight. Clark was also anxious to ensure that he was known by their friends and associates to be the baby's father; he didn't want anyone thinking Lois was marrying him simply to give someone else's child a father, nor did he want any question-marks hanging over their child's parentage which might cause him or her hurt later in life.

Lois drained her mug and handed it to Clark. "Sure. Hey, I bet you Jimmy will claim he knew it all along!"

As she made as if to climb out of bed, Clark blocked her way. "Lois - tell me. No regrets?"

"What - about you? About last night?" Lois searched her fiance's face; the insecurities she had realised he had were still there, though in a lesser degree. She reached up and kissed him. "Clark Kent, I love you, and last night was the most wonderful experience of my life. It made my previous best sexual experience pale into insignificance."

Clark flinched slightly at that; although he had meant what he'd said the previous evening about her previous relationships not bothering him, he felt a little uncomfortable at the realisation that she was able to make comparisons. Cautiously, he asked, "Previous best...?"

Lois grinned at him. "Yep. Want to know when that was?" Seeing the doubt on Clark's face, she decided to put him out of his misery. "It was when our baby was conceived."

His face creased into a reassured, and delighted, smile. "I love you, Lois Lane. And I love you, Baby Lane Kent."

Lois caught her breath. "You'd call our baby Lane-Kent?"

Clark raised his eyebrows at her. "I thought you'd want that, anyway - your name is such an important part of who you are, and I know you want to keep it when we're married. That's fine by me - I don't need the ego-trip of you taking my name. But I thought it would be kind of nice if our baby had both of our names."

Wide-eyed, Lois reached for Clark and hugged him. "I love you, Clark Kent. And I can't understand why it took me so long to see it." Enjoying the feel of his body close to hers again, the unique scent of him, her embrace turned into a caress as she allowed her lips to nuzzle his throat.

Groaning, he protested, "Lois, you don't know what that's doing to me!"

Her response was to slide her hands between his shirt-buttons. "You said you'd called Perry to say we'd be late. Come back to bed, Clark."

He hesitated, clearly torn: she could see the indecision in his face. "Come on - just for ten minutes," she urged persuasively. "It's not as if getting ready is a problem for you - you could be dressed again in under five seconds!"

Clark gently disentangled himself from her arms. She was right; they could spare the time, and the thought that he had pleased her so much that she wanted him again... He divested himself of his clothes in something under a tenth of the time that she had suggested he'd need in order to dress, and joined her in the bed.

After several minutes of delicious kissing and cuddling, Lois made it clear by her body language that she wanted more. Wrapping her arms around Clark's upper body, she tried to urge him on top of her; but he gently resisted. Searching his eyes, Lois silently asked a question; his answering gaze held both desire and reassurance.

He leaned up on his elbow and gazed down at her face. Her eyes were dazed with arousal, and he couldn't resist blowing gently over her breasts, tickling her into further excitement. She threw him an impatient, lustful glare, and he smiled. "I was thinking about this, Lois - how to make it more comfortable for you. And I think I have an idea."

"You do?" She was intrigued; her inexperienced lover was already taking the lead in their lovemaking, and she was very interested indeed to see where this was going.

He nodded. "Lois - you do trust me, don't you?"

"Of *course*!" She was taken aback by the question.

"No, I mean not to take risks with your safety, or to hurt you with my strength," he explained. "I know you're still getting used to the idea that I'm invulnerable and so much stronger than any other man,

and I wouldn't want you to be afraid that I'd forget that, or lose control when I'm with you." The expression in Clark's deep brown eyes was earnest, sincere, and Lois's heart melted yet again.

"I *know* you're Super-strong," she assured him. "But I also know that you're the gentlest man I have ever met. I trust you, completely."

His mouth curved upwards into a beautiful smile; Clark was yet again amazed and gratified at the realisation that Lois loved him wholeheartedly. "Okay," he responded in a different tone. "Let's try it this way." He turned over so that he was lying on his back, the extent of his arousal clearly visible as Lois watched the muscles in his body ripple with his movements. She found herself seized with the urge to run her hands across his rib-cage, down over his stomach and lower still, into his groin. Still, she reminded herself, there would be plenty of time for that in the future; this time it was Clark's turn to set the rules.

He turned to her, extending his arms towards her. "I *do* remember that you like to be on top - so come on." She moved awkwardly with her swollen belly, but he lifted her effortlessly and gently lowered her so that she was half-sitting, half-kneeling over his hips, his proud erection gently thrusting at her entrance.

"Clark - I'm not sure this is very comfortable," she said wryly, feeling a little like a beached whale.

He leaned up and held her gently by the waist with his hands. "Wait."

To her complete shock and amazement, she felt him float upwards, taking her with him. Once he had reached a height where she was sitting comfortably, with her feet resting on the bed, he stopped and maintained his position. She discovered that she was also able to lean forward, to rest her hands on Clark's chest; he continued to hold her in position while raising his knees so that his thighs offered support for her back. A couple of slight movements later and he was inside her, undulating his hips gently beneath her, raising and lowering her at the same time with his hands. He lifted his head and stretched towards her to claim her lips as their bodies moved in tune with each other.

Lois had been on top before, but nothing had prepared her for the intensity of sensation with this man who was able to balance on thin air, bear her weight and do most of the work of physical lovemaking. Once she realised that there was absolutely no way that he would allow her to fall, she concentrated her efforts on allowing her hands to trail wherever they liked over his body, bending forward to nuzzle his throat again with her lips and tongue before returning her attention to his beautiful mouth. She heard him groan deep in his throat, little inarticulate noises of passion which brought her to an incredulous awareness of the extent to which the Man of Steel was sensitive to the lightest of touches. Even her hair, brushing softly against his chest as she moved against him, caused him to shiver in response.

And he could kiss... well, she had discovered *that* the evening he had massaged her calves in her apartment. The man she had worked alongside for a year had the power to drive her completely to

distraction with his kisses, his tongue, the way his lips moved over hers, and teased her, and sucked her... Sensations coursed through her as one sudden dart of his tongue into her mouth coincided with a sharp thrust of his hips which sent him deeper still inside her. Giving herself up to the orgasm which washed over her, she clung to Clark's shoulders, trusting him to support her safely even though he had now reached his own climax.

Afterwards, Clark held Lois gently against him, his hands caressing the curve of her stomach as they lay spoon-fashion on the bed, recovering from their lovemaking. He was amazed to find himself getting used to the feel of her in his arms, the sensation of her naked body against his. Their bodies settled into the curve of each other's as if they were two halves of the same whole, he felt. His mouth nuzzled her ear, tickling her with his breath as his tongue lazily crept out to trace the line of her lobe.

"Clark, that tickles!" Lois protested, not very convincingly. He laughed softly, and transferred his attention to the back of her neck.

"Mmmmm..." she moaned in appreciation, then remembered. "Clark - we'd better get up!"

He stilled, then reluctantly voiced his agreement, sliding out from behind her. "I need another shower now, thanks to you," he observed wryly, then threw her a grin as she responded with a glare which said, 'how dare you blame me?'

Lois stretched, cat-like, on the bed as Clark disappeared into the bathroom; then was slack-jawed in disbelief when he reappeared less than a minute later, soaking wet, a towel thrown over his shoulder. "Bathroom's yours, Lois," he informed her.

So this was what it was going to be like living with Clark Kent, Lois realised as she dragged herself off the bed and headed for the bathroom. It was all very well knowing in her head that he was Superman, she thought to herself as she turned on the shower; actually *seeing* him doing everyday things at Super-speed was something entirely different. And it was so not fair as well, she mused in amused resentment. Still, she reminded herself, having her own personal Super-hero was bound to have its advantages as well. At least they would never run out of essentials - not with someone who could fly anywhere in seconds to buy what was needed. And he would certainly come in handy for spring-cleaning, she remembered with a grin, thinking about the way he had unpacked her belongings the previous day.

Emerging into the bedroom fifteen minutes later, dressed in Clark's bathrobe and with a towel wrapped around her hair, Lois discovered that the bed had been made, their clothes which had been strewn on the floor from the night before had gone - she could hear the distant rumbling of a washing machine, so she surmised that Clark had been busy in her absence - and that one of her favourite maternity suits had been laid out on the bed. She raised her eyebrow at Clark, who chose that moment to return to the bedroom.

"Choosing my clothes now, Kent?" Lois enquired in sardonic amusement. He flushed, unsure whether he had presumed too much, but her smile reassured him. "I could get used to this, you know, Clark - do you

have any idea how long it takes me to decide what to wear sometimes?" Completely unselfconscious with him now, she allowed the robe to fall to the floor and got dressed. Running her fingers through her damp hair, she grimaced; it would take time to dry and they were now running quite late. But she had failed to anticipate her fiance; Clark crossed to stand behind her and in the bedroom mirror she could see him apparently staring intently at her hair. To her surprise, steam began gently to rise, and he lifted several strands to allow the heat to circulate to the hair underneath.

"My heat vision," he explained in response to her incredulous expression. "I could dry it much faster, but then your scalp would get burned, so I'm just using a very small amount of heat - a bit like the strength I used on your legs last week when I was trying not to let you know what I was doing."

"You used heat vision on me?" she asked in surprise. "When?"

He shrugged, allowing her now-dry hair to fall about her shoulders. "Several times, as it happens. When you had back-ache and I rubbed your back - while I was doing it I applied a little bit of heat to relax the muscles."

Lois turned to stare at her partner and fiance. "So that's why your massages always felt so good - and whenever Lucy or my dad tried it, it was never the same!" She shook her head slowly. "You do realise I may never let you go?"

Clark grinned at her, unable to contain his happiness. "That's kind of what I was hoping."

On their way to the jeweller's shop, they passed a news-stand and, out of force of habit, they looked over to check out the competition. The Metropolis Star carried a headline lauding Lex Luthor, who had just made a sizeable donation to the New Troy Children's Hospital Foundation. Clark grunted at Lois's remark that Luthor was either a genuine philanthropist or he wanted something to write off against tax.

"Lois - did I ever tell you just why I was so relieved when you told me you'd never had an affair with Luthor?" Clark asked as they continued down the street.

She glanced at him and grinned. "You were jealous, Flyboy - right?"

"Well..." he parried. "Okay, yes, I was. But that's not the important reason. I discovered not very long after I came to Metropolis that Luthor is not at all what he seems. He's actually a devious, cold-blooded villain." Clark's tone was unemotional, and Lois turned to him in surprise.

"You don't sound particularly angry," she observed. "If what you say is true - well, with what I know about you, I'd expect you to be... less dispassionate."

"Oh, I despise the things Luthor has done, make no doubt about it," Clark assured her in a low voice, not especially wanting their

conversation to be overheard by any passers-by. "He deliberately put people's lives at risk in order to test me. He was behind the Mentamide formula that was given to the Smart Kids - it was all an experiment! And those kids' lives were endangered, just for that! And, although I can't prove anything, I think he was behind the Messenger sabotage and those murders. There's more as well, but I've never been able to prove anything. Even..." he lowered his voice further, "...Superman hasn't been able to come up with enough evidence. And meanwhile Luthor continues to represent himself as a respectable businessman." Despite the quiet tone in which Clark had spoken, Lois noticed that his fists were clenched and she realised that he was in fact extremely angry. She wondered whether part of his anger was actually due to his own inability to prove any of his suspicions, and reached across to squeeze his hand.

"We'll look into it together, Clark - now you've told me, there must be a way we can get something on Luthor. Especially with the - *advantages* - we have on our side," she added with a meaningful glance in his direction. He smiled quickly back at her, returning the squeeze of his hand.

"And by the way," Lois added, "I never was interested in Lex Luthor in that way. I'm not sure what his interest was - he sometimes suggested that he found me attractive, and I wonder if he saw me as a challenge. He *can* be very charming, and I guess I found him an amusing companion once or twice. But what I really wanted was that interview, and I was never going to let my personal feelings interfere with that." She paused, then added, "And once it became known I was pregnant, he stopped contacting me. I got some flowers delivered one day - the card just said, 'Congratulations - he's a lucky man'. Nothing else. And I've only ever seen him at a couple of press conferences since."

Clark nodded, then changed the subject by pointing out that they had arrived at the jewellery shop.

"Lois! Clark! Wondered when you two were going to make it in!"

"Hi Perry," Lois called in response as their editor hailed them barely seconds after they had exited the elevator. "Got time to see us for a minute?"

"Sure - come on in, you two. I want to know how you're getting on with that banking investigation anyway."

They followed Perry into his office, Clark taking care to close the door behind them. The editor glanced enquiringly at Clark following this action, but Lois spoke quickly. "This isn't about a story, Chief; there's something we want to tell you."

Perry waved them to a seat. "Oh yeah? I don't suppose it's got anything to do with that little sparkler on your finger that wasn't there yesterday, Lois?"

Blushing, Lois exchanged glances with Clark.

"Well, hell, I didn't get to be editor of the Daily Planet without having some powers of observation," Perry commented dryly. "It took

you two long enough to get around to it, that's all I can say - although I guess you might have tried dating for a while."

Clark grinned. "We kind of skipped that stage, Chief."

Lois shrugged. "Dating, who needs it?"

Perry White smiled. He was genuinely pleased at this news; these two were his star employees and he considered both to be personal friends as well. Lois was almost like a daughter, and as for Kent... well, a lot of the time he was prouder of Clark than of his own sons. Except for just one thing... although if the boy was finally doing the right thing by Lois, better late than never, the editor considered.

"Congratulations, you two. You want me to announce it to the newsroom?"

Lois cringed. "Not particularly, Perry - we'd rather tell people ourselves."

"Sure - whatever you want. You set a date yet?"

"Nothing definite, Chief," Clark explained. "We have to wait until my parents can work out when they can get away from the farm - but apart from that, the sooner the better."

"Yeah, that makes sense," Perry commented. "Not that I have anything against single parenthood, but since you two are getting married it's better to do it before there's three of you than after."

"Yeah, that's something else we wanted to tell you," Lois interrupted. "About the baby - "

"You finally told him he's the father, did you?" the editor drawled.

"What?" Clark sounded stunned.

"What are you talking about, Perry?" Lois was amazed; she had told Perry her cover-story and she had thought he had accepted it.

"Aw, come on, Lois honey - you know I'm not as green as some of your colleagues out there take me for. I know when someone's stringing me a pack of lies, and I saw through that cock-and-bull story of yours quicker 'n the Colonel spotted Elvis had talent. It was darned obvious to me that Clark's the father. But neither of you were saying anything, and I know Clark's a pretty straight guy. So all I could figure was maybe you hadn't told him it was his." Perry leaned back in his chair, an amused smile lightening his grizzled features.

Clark shook his head slowly. His boss had guessed long ago what he, Clark, had never even considered... but then, he had had absolutely no idea that he and Lois had slept together, so it wasn't exactly his fault, he reasoned.

Lois was defending Clark in exactly those terms. "It wasn't quite as simple as that, Chief. Yeah, Clark and I slept together, but it was only once, and it happened one night when he was sick - I came over to look after him, and he started shivering so much I couldn't warm him except by..." she gestured with her hands, allowing Perry to draw

his own conclusions. "And anyway, it happened, but Clark didn't remember anything about it, so I didn't say anything. Then weeks later I found out I was pregnant, but it was kind of awkward to say anything then, and so... well... I said nothing."

Clark came to Lois's rescue; he, like her, was wondering just how many more times they would have to tell that half-true story about just how she came to be pregnant. "Like you said, Chief, we weren't dating or anything. We were just friends - but we became better friends, and we just fell in love anyway, and I wanted to marry Lois regardless of whose baby she was having. And I couldn't have been happier when she finally told me it's mine." He wrapped his arm around Lois's shoulders, tugging her tightly to him.

"Well, I can see that, son. But that's one hell of a story - you know, if Hollywood made that as a movie, no-one would believe it. But since it's you two... well, I guess it has to be true." The editor stood up; he was enjoying this discussion now. "I don't envy you explaining that one to your parents, Lois."

Clark threw him a wry smile as he and Lois also got to their feet, Lois with a helping hand from her fiance. "Oh, we've already done that. It kind of helped that Lois's father is a doctor."

"It's telling people like Jimmy that worries me," Lois remarked ruefully. "It's been bad enough coping with him so carefully *not* mentioning my pregnancy, and making a point of not asking who the father is... I lost count of the number of times he's started to mention something to do with babies and then stopped dead!" She turned to Clark and added, "And if Ralph even says a *word*...!"

Clark laid his hand lightly on her arm. "You leave Ralph to me, Lois - he'll regret it if he tries to be smart."

"Oh, you'll manage," Perry grinned. "You two usually do manage to come up with the goods." He escorted them to the door of his office. "Now just you make sure I get invited to the wedding, y'hear?"

"Wouldn't have it any other way, Chief," Clark assured him a little absently, his attention already shifting to the newsroom. Some interest had obviously been generated at the sight of Lane and Kent arriving late for work, and immediately being closeted in the editor's office with the door shut. He grimaced as his super-hearing picked up one conversation from the far side of the office.

"Wonder if Lane's handing in her notice?"

"Yeah, well, Kent sure can't carry a pregnant partner - metaphorically *or* literally!" This was accompanied by a snigger.

Clark nudged Lois lightly, and having secured her attention, spoke quietly to her. "You know, honey, I think it might be better to make an announcement - get it over with."

She glanced at him curiously. "Why?" Then she noticed his expression, and added in a lower voice, "You heard someone say something." He nodded wryly. "Ralph?" she asked. He nodded again, more drolly this

time. Lois clenched her fists. "I just wish he'd come over here and say it to my face!"

"He wouldn't dare, Lois," Clark commented. "He's too scared of you."

"He'd better be," she growled. "Okay, an announcement."

She crossed to the centre of the newsroom, leaving Clark to follow behind her. As he watched in admiration, she thumped on a desk with a letter-opener to gain silence; as their colleagues stared at her in open curiosity, she spoke loudly, in an amused tone. "We just thought we'd spare you all the trouble of waiting for the grapevine to get it wrong, and tell you ourselves that Clark and I are getting married in a couple of weeks' time."

As the shocked exclamations ricocheted around the bullpen, Clark moved closer to Lois and draped his arm about her shoulders. "That's right, folks - we got engaged about a week ago. And I'm very happy to be marrying the woman I love and who is going to have my baby."

More shocked faces greeted this statement; Lois caught Jimmy's eye and saw that the young gofer and would-be photographer was looking dumbfounded. Cat hovered just behind Jimmy, and Lois had the satisfaction of noting that her jaw had dropped several inches. Other reporters and newsroom staff began to shout congratulations, some jumping up and coming to shake Clark's hand and kiss Lois on the cheek.

The hubbub was interrupted by Perry, who joined the two reporters and clapped them both on the shoulders. "Congratulations, both of you - and if you manage to turn in any stories today I'll even give you the day off for your wedding!" He then turned to the rest of the newsroom staff and bellowed, "Now get back to work, all of you! This here's a newspaper, not Happy Hour at the bar!"

Although most of the staff were, like Lois and Clark, not deceived by their editor's apparently bad-tempered remark, the noise in the newsroom swiftly returned to the low murmur which had prevailed before Lois's announcement. The two reporters moved to Lois's desk, but were swiftly joined by Jimmy.

"Hey, guys, congratulations!" Jimmy sounded sincere, but Clark noticed a faint withdrawal in the younger man's manner.

He clapped Jimmy on the back, nonetheless. "Thanks, Jimmy - and hey, I'm grateful to you."

"What for, CK?"

Clark grinned at him. "If you hadn't told me Lois wasn't feeling too good that day she went home early, I wouldn't have gone over to see her, and we might not be getting married now."

"Oh, sure." There was still a note of reserve in Jimmy's voice, however. Clark moved to shield Jimmy and Lois from general view, and enquired calmly, "Come on, Jimmy, shoot - what's bothering you?"

The young man looked torn for a moment or two, but then he saw the encouragement in Lois's expression, and gave in. "I'm sorry, CK, Lois - I really am pleased for you, but I guess I just thought... well, you're my friends and all..."

"You thought we might have told you ourselves?" Lois asked him. "We intended to, but - well, people were speculating so we thought it was best to make a general announcement." She held out her ring finger to show him. "We only picked this up this morning, and there hasn't really been a chance to talk to anyone outside our families over the past week."

"I guess it didn't help with CK being away in Canada," Jimmy conceded.

"No, it sure didn't," Lois agreed. "For one thing, it meant I didn't get to move into his place until yesterday..." They chatted for a few minutes about the technicalities of moving and the forgotten junk which emerges when packing up an apartment. However, Jimmy still looked as if something was bothering him, and Lois glared at him.

"Jimmy, what's on your mind?"

He looked uncomfortable, but grimaced and stared at the floor. "I had no idea CK was... well, that the baby..." He trailed off, clearly embarrassed.

"Hey Jimmy, want to know something?" Clark enquired in wry amusement. "Neither did I until just over a week ago!"

Jimmy stared at him in disbelief. "Come on, CK, you know the facts of life!"

Clark rolled his eyes. "That's what Lois's mother said, more or less. Sure, I know. But when you don't remember that anything happened in the first place..." He shrugged helplessly, and Lois laughed.

"Don't remember... were you *drunk*, CK?"

"Not drunk - ill. I just didn't remember a thing about it, except that I had these *weird* dreams. It was kind of embarrassing, sitting across from Lois at work and remembering these really sexy dreams about the two of us..." Clark included Lois in his slightly sheepish smile this time, adding softly, "It was more than a dream come true to discover that they were actually memories, not dreams."

"You romantic softie," she teased him, secretly very flattered, and happy in the knowledge that Clark knew she was flattered.

As she held his gaze, she noticed him become suddenly agitated, and realised that his concentration was no longer on the conversation: he seemed to be focused on something far off. Suddenly realising what was happening, she spoke briskly, "Jimmy, can you check whether Research is done with that stuff I sent down there yesterday? Clark, you need to get to your appointment, don't you?"

Clark, recalled to his surroundings by Lois's voice speaking his name, attempted to focus on her words; there was a major fire in a

school over the other side of Metropolis and he was anxious to get over there. Lois's words suddenly sank in and he realised that she had given him an escape route. Throwing her a very grateful glance, he muttered, "Yeah, that's right - see you later," and hurried towards the stairwell.

Lois, booting up her computer a few moments later, heard the faint sound of a sonic boom in the sky above the Planet, and smiled wryly. How many times had she heard that noise shortly after Clark had dashed off with some excuse or other? Of **course** she now realised it was the result of Superman flying at Super-speed - but why had she never connected the two before?

Perhaps you only see what you want to see, she told herself thoughtfully. Like you told Clark last week, you weren't ready to see him as Superman, and so you didn't. It's like those lateral thinking puzzles - the solution's usually right under your nose, but you just don't see it because you're not looking for it...

And being engaged to Superman - no, **Clark**, she reminded herself - was turning out to be pretty good. Who'd have imagined that under his mild, calm exterior Clark could be quite so passionate? Yet he was also so gentle, so tender; what a paradox when he was also by far the strongest man alive?

Clark returned to the Planet a couple of hours later, having stopped off at his apartment on the way to shower and throw his Super-suit in the washing machine; he had smelled thoroughly of smoke. As he exited the elevator, his eyes immediately searched for Lois; she was seated at her desk, her hand subconsciously rubbing her back. Backache again, he mused; well, he could help with that...

He quickly crossed the newsroom to stand behind her, bending to press his lips lightly against the side of her neck. "Back hurting again, honey?"

She swivelled to look at him. "Yeah - right in the same spot," she responded with a groan.

"No problem - leave it to me." Clark glanced around discreetly to ensure that no-one was looking, then eased his glasses very slightly down his nose before applying his hands to Lois's lower spine, topping up his massage with a few gentle darts of heat vision. Lois groaned softly as the effect of his handiwork sank in; what she would have given to have had Clark on hand every day of the past few months! She should never have stopped asking him for back-rubs; even without knowing the secret of his success at the art, she had known he was effective.

He ceased his ministrations and glanced at her screen, reading it as he stood resting one hand on her shoulder. "What's this about, honey? New story?"

She smiled up at him; she had always enjoyed their working habits, the way Clark stood behind her and read her screen over her shoulder, offering suggestions. Even when he corrected her spelling - which he knew drove her crazy - she secretly loved it. "Just an idea I had for a feature, if I can get it past Perry. An old friend of mine from

journalism school got me started - she works for a paper in London now, and I'd told her I'd be taking maternity leave in about eight weeks or so. Well, she emailed me today to tell me about maternity provisions in Europe - I was amazed! Did you know that British employers have to give their women employees paid maternity leave?" Warming to her theme, she switched from her editing screen to her Internet browser. "Look at this, Clark! It's a European Union Directive..."

"Yeah, the Pregnant Workers Directive. I see," Clark murmured, leaning forward. "No, let me scroll..." His hand grasped her mouse, and she stared at him slack-jawed as she saw him scroll down the document so quickly the text became a blur. Super-speed-reading, she concluded weakly.

"Yeah, I get it," he commented. "Still, governments only have to legislate for pay at social security rates, which doesn't imply a high level of pay."

"No, but in Britain once a woman's been employed for two years by the same employer she gets 26 weeks' leave - okay, after six weeks of that the pay is back to social security levels, but look at this..." She pulled up another Web page, this time a briefing paper about UK employer maternity provisions. "Most of these companies offer the 26 weeks at full pay! And what does our generous government give women here? Twelve weeks, without pay!"

Clark smiled. "Come on, Lois, can you really imagine taking six months off work?"

She glared at him. "No, but that's not the point here."

He smiled sympathetically. "I know it isn't - I was just winding you up. Seriously, things look a lot better over there. But on the other hand, there's a huge cost implication to this kind of thing, surely?"

Lois drummed her fingers on her desk. "You really think that's an adequate defence, Clark?"

"No, I don't," he assured her firmly. "I'm just playing devil's advocate. Hey, remember I was the one who supported you when you persuaded the union to negotiate an extra week of paid leave from the Planet's publishers?"

He had been; Lois remembered that union meeting very clearly. There had been little sympathy with her demand, with mutterings about costs and there being better things to ask for, like improved leisure facilities. Clark had argued, rather forcefully for him, she had thought at the time, that just because the maternity provisions affected only a small number of Planet employees was no reason to deem the issue unimportant.

"So," he added, "you getting concerned about how much time off you'll get, then?"

Lois shook her head. "No, I sorted that out a while ago. I've got my eight weeks' paid leave from the Planet, and I can take an extra month unpaid if I want, but I've also got three weeks' paid vacation time I haven't used if I need it. I won't start it until I go into

labour if I can manage it."

Clark nodded. "Well, don't imagine you'll be coping on your own. I'd decided a couple of months ago that I'd take vacation time to be with you if you wanted, and a few days ago I checked out the Planet's paternity leave policy..." He gestured towards the screen. "Don't worry, it was on the on-line employee benefits guide. Anyway, I get ten days paid, and I can take unpaid time as well if I want. And I still have that vacation time I saved - so if I need to I can be at home with you for almost five weeks without needing unpaid time. And I'm sure Perry won't mind us working at home for a while after that so we can take care of the baby together."

Apart from when Superman is needed, Lois thought, but decided not to say anything; she was already aware that Clark frequently felt guilty about having to leave her on the times he had done so. "Yeah, we probably better not take too much unpaid time if we can help it," Lois mused, secretly amazed and delighted that Clark had been planning on giving up his own time for her before he'd even known the baby was his. "We'll need to save our cash - Mother assures me babies are expensive!"

Clark smiled. "We'll be fine - I already know my parents are planning on helping out. Mom's already knitting, and Dad's found my old crib, the one he made for me. He says he'll clean it up if we want it. And I checked out the employee spending account details - if we start paying into one now, we can get tax concessions on daycare when the time comes." He straightened then and gestured towards Lois's computer again. "So, what were you writing then?"

Lois shrugged. "I thought I might do a feature on how American women don't get as good treatment when they're pregnant as women in Europe. It's really ridiculous that women have to use their sick leave or vacation time to have a baby - giving birth is not a holiday or an illness!"

"Sounds like this could be a bit of a crusade," Clark commented, smiling. "I'm all for it."

"Good," Lois replied. "We should be campaigning for a change in the law, to require paid leave at the very least. The Planet can start the ball rolling, and if I get my local chapter of NoW to take it up that'll help too..."

Clark smiled to himself as he listened to Lois laying out her strategy, as usual planning several steps ahead of herself and going off on tangents as other thoughts occurred to her. Just one more of the things he loved about her, he reflected...

Lois clicked on the remote control to turn off the TV as the news bulletin ended. It still felt very strange to watch Superman in action and to know that underneath the Suit was Clark, her fiance and best friend. Now that she knew, on the few occasions she had seen him in public or on TV as Superman she found it hard to understand how anyone who knew Clark well didn't see the similarities. Of course, the hairstyle wasn't the same, and Clark really did look very different in his glasses - and he also held himself more rigidly as Superman, so that he appeared taller and more authoritative. But it

was still Clark, no matter how much he deepened his voice and maintained a serious demeanour. Superman rarely smiled, Lois thought; but when he did, he had a beautiful grin. She had now seen that same grin on Clark's face on a number of occasions.

There's none so blind as those who will not see... As Clark had told her one day when he had been explaining how he had managed to maintain the secret identity for so long, most people simply did not expect to see Superman in an ordinary reporter. And Clark Kent, Lois had to admit, did not particularly resemble a Super-hero in any way. She blushed now as she remembered how she and Perry had scorned his attempts to protect her after Dr Winninger's murder: how they had laughed almost despairingly as Clark had clumsily bumped into a desk at the newsroom. Another thought occurred to her suddenly: he had walked her home after she had almost been run over outside the Planet, and he had suddenly thrown her to the ground, shielding her body with his own. He had insisted afterwards that someone had been shooting at her, and she had refused to believe him. But someone probably **had** shot at her... and Clark had saved her life. He must have stopped the bullets himself, which was why he had not been able to produce any evidence of the alleged shooting.

How many times had Clark saved her life, in one way or another? As Superman, many times; she was well aware of that. But as himself: how often had he put himself in the way when they had been in danger? A further thought occurred to her: when Antoinette Baines had left the two of them, and Jimmy, to die in a chemicals explosion, Clark had somehow managed to break their chains. She had wondered briefly at the time how he had managed it; but what was more obvious now was how he had managed to get them out of the warehouse. That weird sensation Jimmy had mentioned; they **had** been flying. Clark had flown them out. She smiled dryly at the memory: had he really **needed** to drop them in that filthy puddle?

She frowned, trying to assimilate what she knew about Clark with the little she had known about Superman before she had discovered his true identity. It was quite a task, fitting the two parts of the one man together. And with each memory went the thought: that was **Clark** who did that! It was Clark who had rescued the Prometheus; Clark who had flown her back to the Planet - and whom she had chased all over Metropolis subsequently. It was also Clark who had flown into outer space to stop the Nightfall Asteroid. And it had been **Superman** who had stood next to her in the newsroom as she had tried to describe her flying super-hero; she had told Clark that his eyes were insipid mud-brown next to Superman's. She flushed and went hot and cold with embarrassment as she remembered commenting that Clark was the before and Superman the after... the way, way after.

But it didn't seem to bother Clark; on their way to Smallville he had even teased her about one of the things she had said to him when they had first met. 'This is where you meet my parents, and you try to kiss me behind the dairy freeze on the way home... you know how it works, Lois,' he had said with a smile. No, Clark held no grudges, although she couldn't have blamed him if he had.

She now wanted to know more about him, however. It seemed that they had managed hardly any time alone together since that fateful morning at her apartment. They had visited the Kents and talked to the Lanes; then Clark had had to go on that trip to Canada. Between his investigations up there and trying to maintain a presence in

Metropolis as Superman, they had seen little of each other. Even since she had moved into his apartment he had not been around much. After their first, blissful, night together it seemed as if every villain, murderer or arsonist in Metropolis had conspired to prevent Clark from spending time at home with his fiancee. This was now the third evening running he'd had to go out to help at some emergency, and if this turned out to be like the two previous nights he wouldn't get back until after she had fallen asleep. The first night he'd had to go out, she had tried to wait up for him; he had returned at about one in the morning to find her curled up, asleep, on the sofa and had carried her gently to bed. Last night she had gone to bed of her own accord, having heard on the news that Superman was busy putting out a fire on an oil-rig out in the Atlantic.

She worried about Clark when he was out on his rescues, although he had smiled at her when she had told him this. After all, he had observed in gentle amusement, had she worried about Superman before she had known he was Clark? She had, sometimes, she had confessed; but usually she had just accepted that he would be fine - after all, he was *Superman*.

"I still am Superman, Lois," Clark had assured her. "You know I'm invulnerable - I've only ever come across one thing that can hurt me, and I haven't encountered any of that for about a year."

Lois had caught her breath. "That green rock - the stuff we called Kryptonite! Is that why you were behaving so strangely the first time we went to Smallville? Your mom said it was allergies..."

He had responded with a lop-sided smile. "I've never had an allergy in my life, Lois - and that really was the first time I'd ever had a paper cut. Trask had Kryptonite, and he was correct in his assumption that it could kill me. I have never, ever, felt in so much pain as when I was exposed to that stuff." He had shrugged carelessly then, and added, "But anyway, I haven't seen any of it since, so I guess that's not going to be problem any time in the future."

Yawning now, Lois glanced at her watch, surprised to discover that it was only eight pm. Pregnancy sure makes you tired, she mused in wry amusement; and yet at the end of it you end up with sleepless nights and endlessly busy days. You'd think nature would have designed the gestation period as one where women *accumulated* energy, rather than a time when they felt completely wiped out, she thought, her mouth turning down at the corners.

Just as she was debating with herself whether to go and lie down for an hour or so, or to boot up her lap-top and do some work, she heard a distinctive *whoosh* outside on the balcony. A moment later, Clark strode through the kitchen, his cape swinging behind him. He looked tired, she thought, watching him spin and come to a stop dressed in a shirt and jeans. Was that spin slower than usual?

"Hi, honey," she called to him. "Want some coffee?"

He moved swiftly to her side and bent, capturing her lips in a hard kiss. "God, I needed that!" As she raised her hand to stroke his face, he covered it with his own briefly before stepping back. "I'll get it, honey, you stay where you are." Returning to the kitchen, he super-speed through the motions of preparing drinks, deciding on tea instead of coffee since Lois was still not drinking caffeine and he

hated decaffeinated. Filling two mugs with water, he boiled the water in both simultaneously with heat vision, adding the infusers of jasmine tea. Struck by a thought then, he leaned around the corner of the room and asked Lois whether she was hungry.

Her mouth curved into a smile. "You read my mind, Clark - you know what? I'd love some chocolate ice-cream!"

Clark grinned and reached for the freezer as Lois added, "Oh, do you have any grapefruit, Clark? I'd really like some with the ice-cream."

He strode into the living-room again. "Loooiss! I've heard of cravings, but that's ridiculous!"

"Have you got any?" she demanded, ignoring his incredulous expression.

"Not yet, but..." his disembodied voice spoke into the vacuum created by his sudden, and very speedy, departure.

"...we do now," he finished, barely seconds later as he stood in front of her, in the Superman outfit, holding a branch with four fruit attached to it. Lois gasped; then shook her head slowly as Clark appeared to shimmer and then became clearly defined again dressed in the casual clothes he had worn just a minute earlier.

He returned to the kitchen and Lois, due to her position on the couch, was unable to see, but Clark's hands then became a blur as he peeled and sliced one of the grapefruit at Super-speed, added it to several scoops of Lois's favourite triple chocolate ice-cream, and - moving at almost human speed - brought the bowl to her, returning to the kitchen to re-heat, then carry in the tea.

He sat at the opposite end of the couch, trying not to grimace as he watched Lois eat her strange mixture, then grinned as she assumed a blissful expression and laid the empty bowl on the floor. "Just as well I got four of them, if you like that so much," he commented dryly.

She stuck her tongue out at him. "I should warn you - some of my cravings don't last beyond the first time. You might offer me grapefruit for breakfast tomorrow and I could go and throw up!"

He smiled, and reached out to take her legs by the ankles, drawing her lower limbs over his lap; then began to massage her calves lightly. Lois groaned, a guttural sound of relief and pure pleasure. "How did you know I was getting cramp again?"

Clark smiled. "Could have been all those little winces every time you shifted about, or even the way you tried to reach down and rub your legs yourself. Anyway, you know all you had to do was ask."

Lois relaxed and settled back into the corner of the sofa, watching her fiance through half-closed eyes. Neither of them had bothered to switch on the main room light, and as it was dark outside the only light in the apartment - Clark had turned off the kitchen light before joining Lois - was a small table-lamp at the opposite side of the living-room. The low light cast shadows across Clark's face, seeming to emphasise his faintly Oriental colouring and the angles

and lines of his profile. Yes, he definitely looks weary, Lois thought.

Clark, glancing up, caught Lois's eye. "What's on your mind, honey?"

"You mean apart from what your hands are doing to me?" Lois teased. "I was thinking that you look tired," she added more seriously.

He shrugged. "I guess. It's been a tough couple of days - I don't know why there have been so many emergencies, but I'm telling you I'm ready for a night off for Superman."

"Me too," Lois agreed with enthusiasm. Clark shot her an anxious look.

"Is this a problem for you, Lois? Me leaving to be Superman, I mean."

Quickly, she shook her head. "No, of course not - I mean, your running off all the time used to bother me, but that was only because I never knew where you were going, and I used to wonder whether it was to get away from me - "

"Never!" Clark interjected swiftly.

"- but once you told me you're Superman I understood," she added softly. "Sure, I wish we had been able to spend more time together these last couple of days, but I know there was nothing you could do about it. You **have** to help - that's what you do, and I wouldn't want it any other way."

"I'm so glad you understand, Lois," Clark murmured sincerely. "There were so many times in the past when I just didn't have any choice but to go, and I knew you didn't know why I was doing it, and I hated it."

Lois's eyes widened in realisation. "That night we'd been at the Planet and we felt the baby move, and you were going to come home with me and have dinner - that was a Superman emergency, wasn't it?"

Clark nodded. "I was so - **frustrated** - about that night. I'd really wanted to be with you - I thought our relationship finally seemed to be going somewhere, that I might get a chance to tell you how I really felt about you... then I had to go and sort out that bomb. And when I finally got to call you, you were so cool and you pretended that nothing had happened between us." He paused, his expression unfocused as he reflected on the memory. "And then you were distant with me for ages after that. I really thought I'd blown it."

"**I** thought you'd left because you realised what I'd been about to suggest to you, and you just weren't interested," Lois explained.

"And what was that...?" Clark prompted.

"I'd decided to ask you if you'd be willing to raise my baby with me - I wasn't sure in what capacity... I guess I had the vague idea that we might get married, but at the very least I was thinking maybe we'd

move in together, as friends at first if need be, but probably later as lovers. Then you left... and I figured you didn't want to know."

"Never, Lois!" he assured her.

She leaned towards him and covered his large hand with her own. "I know, Clark."

He got to his feet, scooped her up from the couch, and sat down again with her in his arms. "I love you, Lois," he murmured, bending to kiss her.

The kiss might well have escalated into much more, but Lois drew away after several minutes. "Clark, I'd like to talk," she suggested.

Wondering what was on her mind, Clark shifted his position to make them both more comfortable, and offered, "Sure - go ahead."

"I have some... questions... about you," she volunteered, a little shyly. It had been one thing wondering about Clark in his absence; somehow, it seemed a little different raising the subject of his Super-persona while she was in his arms. She wasn't sure why, but she was hesitant.

Clark, however, simply stroked her hair with his fingertips before replying softly, "I guess you have. We haven't really talked about this much, have we? What with telling our folks, then me being away, and getting you moved in here... But I'm all yours now - Superman's not going out again unless it's something the emergency services really can't handle." He smiled encouragingly at her. "So - what do you want to know?"

Lois's fingers played with the fringes of the throw-blanket on the couch, and she sighed. "I don't know why this is so hard, Clark... it's not *difficult*, exactly, but it's been a little tough to get my head around. I was doing some thinking earlier, while you were out - trying to reconcile Clark and Superman in my head, sort of, and it's been quite a revelation. I mean, all this time I thought the two of you were separate people, and now I'm putting everything together - each time I remember something Superman did, I'm now realising that *you* did that."

She paused, and Clark remained silent, now brushing her hair with his palm. He had realised that she must be having these kind of thoughts; he had carried on the deception with her for over a year, and she was certainly the one person in Metropolis who had known both parts of him well. If anyone could have worked out his secret on her own, Lois could have, and he could well understand if she was feeling angry at herself for failing to do so.

But as she spoke again he realised that this was not what was on her mind. "Clark, I was so cruel to you sometimes!" she exclaimed, sounding upset. He instantly wrapped his arms tightly around her.

"Lois, you were *never* cruel!" he insisted.

"Yes, I was! Like when I was horrible about you in contrast to

Superman - or when I was only glad to see you alive after we were thrown out of Trask's plane because it meant Superman was alive as well - or when I laughed at you as a bodyguard. And all the time you were... and you never said a word... and you could have..." She paused, and swallowed. "In your place, I don't know whether I'd have laughed at my stupidity, or been hurt because I was so nasty."

"Lois, you were never deliberately hurtful," he assured her. "Yeah, okay, you made the occasional thoughtless remark, but that's all it was. And you usually made up for it in some other way when you'd realised. And since you couldn't have known I was Superman, how could I blame you for not seeing me in the same light as him?"

Lois shrugged, burying her face in Clark's broad shoulder. "I should have realised. You deserved far better than the way I treated you."

Again, he shook his head, sliding his hand under Lois's chin to tip her head upwards. "You **did** realise - you told me, that morning at your apartment when you thought you were speaking to Superman, that you had come to realise that I was someone you cared about very much. You have no idea what that meant to me, Lois - apart from my feelings about the baby's father, I never thought I'd have any real chance with you because you would always want Superman first. Finding out that you wanted **me**, not him, was... a revelation." He paused, bending his head to capture her lips in a swift, passionate kiss.

"But I want you to know, I didn't stay quiet then just to see what you would say about me - Clark, I mean," he added. "I didn't say anything at first because I was just so hurt and disappointed that you didn't seem to want me - as Superman, I mean - to be with you and our child. You'd been talking about me as Clark for a while before I actually realised what you were saying. **Then** it dawned on me that I still hadn't told you who I really was, so I changed clothes and showed you."

Tears glistening brightly in her eyes, Lois replied, "And I just couldn't believe it when I turned around. It was as if everything I knew, all the certainties in my life, just didn't exist any more. And yet... it was almost as if I **should** have known, as if something had been there all along which should have made it obvious. I realised as I was speaking that when I was describing Clark's attributes I could just as easily have been describing Superman's, you know? That alone should have told me."

Clark remained silent for a few minutes, just holding Lois close to him and stroking her hair and shoulders. He too was remembering their shared past and the frustrations of having to maintain two identities with Lois; there were times when it had been sheer torture. Not any longer, however; and it was so good to be **himself** with her.

She shifted a little, and he lowered his gaze to meet hers. "So, Lois, you said you had some questions?"

She raised her face to his again, now smiling, reassured by the warmth of his embrace. "Yeah. When I first interviewed Superman - you - for the Planet, you told me you were from Krypton. I didn't ask, but I assumed at the time that you must have just arrived on Earth.

But then last week I found out who you were, and all of my preconceptions changed completely. I mean, Clark, I know you grew up here - well, in Kansas. The first time you took me there, your mom showed me all your baby pictures."

"But you know now that I came here as a baby," Clark reminded her. "When we flew to Smallville that day, my parents told you all about finding me in the spaceship."

Lois nodded. "Sure. But - you only became Superman about a week after you started at the Planet - unless you wore that suit somewhere else first and I never got to hear about it!"

Clark grinned. "Nope, the Suit was all new the first time you saw me in it."

"So - how did you become Superman?" Lois asked curiously.

Clark kissed her lips lightly again before answering; he smiled then as he spoke. "Actually, that was your doing, Lois." At her amazed expression, he said, "You probably don't remember it, but one day you told me I should do as you did and bring a change of clothes to work."

Lois frowned; she couldn't immediately remember the conversation. Then a picture came into her mind: a problem outside the Planet buildings, someone trapped down a manhole; the victim suddenly and mysteriously emerging through the hole in the ground; Clark having disappeared for a moment, then reappearing with his suit smeared with dirt; the man who'd been trapped raving and identifying Clark as the person who had saved him. Everyone had thought he was mad; Clark himself had said the man was surely delirious. Her eyes widened. "It *was* you! You rescued him!"

Clark nodded. "I had to - he could have died otherwise. But that was what it was always like for me before, Lois. I wanted to help - *needed* to - but there was always the danger of being caught, the risk that someone might recognise me. And, as my dad always says, then I might get taken off to a laboratory and dissected like a frog. So I had to be very careful - and that's why I always moved around so much before." He paused, and an impulse led him to trace the line of Lois's lips with his fingertip. She responded by drawing his finger into her mouth and sucking gently. His eyes closed briefly as erotic sensations flooded through him and his body began to respond to the closeness of hers. Then he sighed; he'd promised to answer her questions, and he would.

"When I came to Metropolis - and especially when I got the job at the Planet - I desperately wanted to stick around. I didn't want to keep moving indefinitely, and almost as soon as I arrived here I knew it was where I wanted to be. But I still couldn't ignore people in trouble. Then when you made that remark about a change of clothes - it all seemed to fit. I went home and asked my Mom to make me a disguise."

"And that's when you created Superman?" Lois asked.

"Yep - that's it," he told her. "So really, you can take a lot of the credit for it. And you named him, as well, of course - so I guess Superman is really mostly your creation."

Lois shook her head slowly; this was a lot to take in. "So have you always known you were from Krypton?"

"Nope," Clark replied, a pensive expression on his face. "All the time I was growing up, discovering I was different from other kids, realising that I could see through things, hear things I shouldn't - and even worse, that if I looked at something the 'wrong' way, I could set it on fire... it was driving me crazy, not knowing *why*. Sure, Mom and Dad had found me in a spaceship, but they had no idea where I came from. They wondered for years if I was some Russian experiment, or some secret Government project - we had no idea. Even after I'd grown up, and could fly and had just about all the powers I had now, we were still no wiser." He fell silent for a moment, remembering how it had felt to be *different*, to grow up knowing that there were so many things he could do that he just couldn't tell anyone about. It was no wonder that he had been a shy, introverted boy, who had grown into a self-conscious and hesitant adult.

Seeing Lois's gaze on him, waiting for him to continue, Clark spoke again. "Remember Trask's warehouse - all the UFOs?" She nodded, wondering at the apparent change of subject. "Under one of the tarps I found my spaceship."

She gasped at the bald statement. "The spaceship you came to Earth in? How did you recognise it?"

"It had my - Superman's - emblem on it. You know - the S?" She nodded. "That's like a family crest or something, though I didn't find that out until much later. And there were some strange designs along the side - almost like runes. Anyway, apart from the 'S', I recognised it from my parents' description. And in a small bag beside it was a little globe of the planet Earth. I picked it up - and it glowed, Lois! And the pattern changed, to show a red planet - and I somehow *knew* that it was Krypton, and that was where I came from. Don't ask me how I knew - I just did."

Wide-eyed, Lois stared at him. She couldn't imagine how it must have felt for the young Clark, knowing that he didn't fit in, wondering where he came from, who his real parents were, where the strange powers came from - but to find the evidence of his origins suddenly, without any warning, must have been overwhelming. "So what did you do with the globe and the spaceship?"

He frowned, looking almost bereft for a moment. "I took the globe with me then, but obviously I couldn't do anything with the spaceship - you were there and I didn't want to raise your suspicions. But if you remember, when we went back to the warehouse with Jimmy and Perry, it was empty. I've never seen the spaceship since."

"Oh, Clark!" Lois exclaimed in gentle sympathy, pressing her body closer to him.

He returned the pressure, gaining comfort from her closeness. Then he took a deep breath and continued. "That's not all. A couple of months ago the globe 'spoke' to me."

"What do you mean, spoke to you?" Lois demanded incredulously.

"Just that," he answered. "It was weird - I'd kept it in a little chest for months since I found it, but it never did anything other than glow a little and change from Earth to Krypton whenever I touched it. Then one night I was awakened by a really bright light, and I got up to see where it was coming from... it was the globe, trying to float its way out of the chest. I picked it up, and it floated right out of my hand, and then I saw... well, I can only describe it as a hologram. A man appeared - he was dressed in kind of shimmering white robes, but he had the S symbol on his chest. He said his name was Jor-El, and that I was his son, Kal-El - and that the fact that I was hearing his voice meant that I had made the journey safely from Krypton. He said the globe had become 'attuned' to me, probably because I'd had it for so long by then, and that was why it was speaking to me."

"So you actually found out about where you come from, and why you're here?" Lois prompted, her eyes shining with excitement as she listened to the story unfolding.

"Yeah - he appeared to me five times in all, telling me a little more each time. I thought, you know, that it would have been nice to have heard all this a little earlier, but then Mom reminded me that I probably wasn't supposed to have been separated from the globe. You see, Dad had buried the spaceship, and the globe with it - the globe was its navigation instrument. And when I tried to look for it, years later, it was gone. I guess Trask or some other Bureau 39 people must have found it, not long after Dad buried it."

"So what else did he - your father - say to you?" Lois asked, highly curious. Clark hesitated before answering; Lois, noticing this, wondered whether it was a sensitive subject. "I'm sorry - you don't have to tell me if you don't want to."

He shook his head. "I do - I'm just wondering whether..." He trailed off, then Lois became aware that she was being very gently raised and then lowered again onto the sofa cushions. Clark got to his feet and crossed to the bookshelves at the rear of the room, returning a moment later with a small round object.

"This is it - give me a minute and it should 'wake up', " he explained. Just as he'd finished speaking, the globe began to glow and it floated off Clark's hand and hovered in mid-air. Clark resumed his seat on the couch, this time beside Lois, and waited.

Jor-El appeared again, and the five messages stored in the globe played one after the other. Clark heard Lois take several short, sharp intakes of breath as she saw the scenes leading to the destruction of New Krypton, and the two Kryptonians, Clark's natural parents, preparing to launch him into outer space in order to save his life.

"Those people - your parents - they did this to save your life!" she breathed at last. "And they - they were killed when the planet exploded?"

Clark nodded. "I can only assume they were - I'd like to think that if they had survived they'd have found me, somehow."

Her eyes clouded. "Much as I hated growing up in my family sometimes, at least I knew my parents. I can't imagine being in your position,

not knowing where you came from or who your parents were - and then only seeing them like this."

Clark smiled slightly and shook his head. "Lois, my parents are Jonathan and Martha Kent. They're the only parents I ever knew, and the best parents I could possibly have had. Jor-El and Lara... well, they're no more than pictures on a movie screen to me. But it is good to know who I am, and why I'm here - that's what was really so difficult when I was growing up, just not knowing."

"And your name is really Kal-El," she murmured, her eyes taking in the smooth planes of his face, the jawline and curve of the eyebrows which so resembled those of his birth-father.

"Yes - but I prefer Clark. It's what I've been called all my life - Kal-El doesn't seem... *right* somehow." He hesitated again. "It's weird - once I found the globe, and then when it spoke to me, I found out the answers to a whole lot of questions which had bothered me for years. But I don't really feel any sense of belonging to Jor-El and Lara, or to Krypton. And you know, if I found out tomorrow that Krypton hadn't exploded after all and that I could go back there if I wanted - I don't think I would. *This* is my home, here on Earth - Martha and Jonathan are my parents... and you are my future wife, and we're going to be a family soon. I know who I am now - I'm Clark Kent, and that's all I want to be." He paused, considering for a moment. "Sure, I'm Superman too, but that's just - a disguise, a means of helping while still managing to have a life of my own. Kal-El really doesn't exist any more. That baby in the hologram - he's Kal-El. But Kal-El ceased to exist as soon as Mom took me out of that spaceship and told Dad they were going to keep me."

"That's an incredible story, Clark," Lois breathed. "To think that you travelled all that distance as a tiny baby... I'm not sure I'd have believed all this if I hadn't seen it for myself."

"Lois." Clark gripped her hands in his suddenly. "There's something I need to know. Does it - bother you - that I'm not human... that I'm an alien from another planet?"

She stared at him. "How can you think that, Clark? I've known you for over a year, and in that time I've come to realise you're the kindest, most honest, loyal and loving man I have ever known. You have wonderful qualities of compassion and caring - and I wouldn't care if you were from Earth, Krypton or Mars - I love you!" The passionate sincerity in her voice was tremendously reassuring to Clark, who released a long breath he hadn't even realised he'd been holding. She grinned suddenly and continued. "*And* you can fly - what more could a girl want?"

"Ah - you don't mind about the flying, then?" he teased.

She grinned again, swatting his arm lightly with her hand. "That's definitely a bonus."

Clark laughed; he felt much more relaxed suddenly. He hadn't even realised that he'd been concerned about Lois's feelings about his alien origins until they'd had this conversation; but suddenly, sitting there with her as he had laid bare his background and watched the globe tell its story, he hadn't been able to stop himself wondering how she felt about it all. Was she really happy about the

idea of sleeping with an alien - getting married to an alien? But it seemed it wasn't a big deal at all.

He turned to her, intending to change the subject, to tell her about one of his Super escapades that evening, but he saw her yawn hugely and struggle to keep her eyes open. Smiling, supremely content in the knowledge that he was loved and wanted by this woman whom he loved more than anything in the world, he gently scooped her into his arms and carried her to the bedroom, where with featherlight touches he very quickly stripped her of her clothes and slipped her nightgown over her head. By the time he had pulled her into his arms in the bed, she was already fast asleep.

"Did I fall asleep again last night, sweetheart?" Lois mumbled the following morning when a fully-dressed Clark brought her a mug of decaf coffee. He grinned, leaving her to draw her own conclusions.

"Darn!" she muttered, yawning and stretching out under the covers.

He came to sit by her on the bed. "What's the problem, honey? It's only natural that you'd be tired - in the pregnancy book I'm reading, it says - "

She sat up as abruptly as her altered body shape would allow her. "Hold on a minute! You're reading a *pregnancy book*?"

Clark, a little taken aback at her response - it was almost indignant - nodded. "Actually, I've read quite a few - this one is about what to expect in the final trimester and leading up to the birth."

"And the others...?" Lois enquired tensely.

Clark, still unsure why she was reacting in this way, supplied the answer. "Early-stage pregnancy, advice on eating, the usual sort of stuff."

"Why?" This time, Lois was definitely on her guard.

Baffled, Clark reached for her hand and squeezed it. "Because I wanted to know how I could help you. I didn't know the first thing about pregnancy, so I figured maybe I'd better read some of those books too." He paused, then focused his gaze on her face. "Lois, I wanted to be there for you. But I would have been no use at all if I knew nothing about what you were going through. I just wanted to understand, okay?"

"Okay," she replied softly. "I don't know why I got upset - I suppose... it's just sometimes felt as if it's not *my* body any more. The way people behave... and then you saying you'd read pregnancy books..." She took a huge, unsteady intake of breath. "You've got every right to read about it if you want - I mean, this is your baby, you *should* understand what's going on, right?"

Clark ignored her question, concentrating on the part of her response which had caught his attention. "How do people behave?"

Lois looked away; trust Clark to notice that, she thought. The concern in his voice forced a response out of her. "Most of the time it's not much, I guess - though I really wish that a woman's pregnancy didn't make other people assume they're entitled to take liberties! They touch my stomach, 'to see if they can feel the baby move' - they pass remarks about my shape, that my breasts are bigger, or that my hips are narrow and so I'll have a tough time in labour, and they tell me what I should or shouldn't be doing." She threw Clark a rueful half-smile as she finished. "Sorry - it just gets to me sometimes, and I've wanted to have someone to gripe about it to."

"That's what I'm here for," he assured her with a caring smile, stroking her face with his index finger. "But why didn't you talk to me about this weeks ago, if it was getting to you this much? Oh... let me guess, I'm one of the people who's been telling you what you shouldn't be doing, right?"

She gave him a wry smile in return. "Once or twice, yes - and it did infuriate me occasionally. But at least I knew with you that you had my best interests at heart and that you weren't just giving me a lecture because it felt good."

"So who touches you?" Clark enquired.

"It's usually some of the women - from Research, the admin pool, you know," Lois explained. "They're not too bad - some of them have kids of their own, and I've picked their brains once or twice. But Ralph tried one day - "

"Ouch! I'm amazed he's still standing upright!" Clark laughed.

"Actually, I was so shocked that he tried to, it took me a moment or two to react," Lois confessed. "By the time I did, he'd seen my face and decided to back off."

"Well, if he tries it again just kick him somewhere... painful," Clark suggested.

Lois laughed. "You mean you're not going to suggest that you'll deal with him for me? A quick blast of laser-vision to his feet or something?"

Smiling in amusement, Clark shook his head. "Hey, this is Lois Lane I'm talking to here. I know she's *more* than capable of defending herself - I remember being told off in no uncertain terms for trying to suggest she takes care of herself and the baby!"

Lois raised an eyebrow at him. "Not fair - I was annoyed with Superman then anyway, and I had no idea he was you."

"Yeah, and Superman hadn't a clue why you were annoyed with him!" Clark pointed out. "But I decided it would be best if Superman stayed away from you, after that."

"Hmmm," Lois murmured thoughtfully. "Is Superman still following that rule?"

"You want him to?" Clark enquired, wondering where this was leading.

In response, she reached out and curved her palm along his bare neck. It was their day off - Clark had persuaded Perry to assign them to the same rota for the time being - and he was wearing a T-shirt and jeans. "I wouldn't mind a little display of Super-enthusiasm here and now, honey."

Clark raised an eyebrow in an exaggerated gesture. "You'd like that?" He got to his feet. "You want me in the Suit?"

Lois laughed aloud. "No chance! I remember the last time - it's far too difficult to get you out of!"

"Not for me it isn't," he pointed out, spinning into and out of the blue and red Spandex instantaneously just to prove the point. Lois flicked at his thigh, encased in blue denim.

"I'd rather you weren't wearing anything," she growled huskily.

Clark took a sharp intake of breath. He was beginning to realise that Lois could be sexually aggressive, and he loved it; on that first morning after she moved in he had been highly delighted when she'd demanded he return to bed. He **did** want to make love with her again; he'd just not suggested it because he was aware that she was frequently tired at the moment. And the demands on his **alter ego** the past few nights hadn't helped.

About to spin out of his clothes, he remembered Lois's comment of a few days earlier about his Super-speed dressing, and instead chose to pull his T-shirt over his head in an exaggerated gesture. Dropping it carelessly on the floor, he removed his glasses and laid them on the nightstand. His hand went to his jeans belt; he decided at that moment to glance at Lois.

She was still sitting up in bed, watching him with what he could only interpret as a hungry expression. Her eyelids were partly lowered and her gaze was intent on his body. As he undid his belt and slowly pulled it through the loops of his waistband, he shot her another swift glance. Her tongue-tip had appeared, and she licked suddenly dry lips. He allowed his belt to fall to the floor, and then turned his attention to the button fastening of his fly. Slowly, so slowly, he allowed his fingers to find the button, to grip it, to slide it carefully through the hole. He grasped the material at either side and pulled lightly, exposing the tip of the line of hair which arrowed down towards his groin. He didn't need Super-hearing to hear Lois catch her breath.

Taking his time, he took the zipper tab in his hand and gently began to ease it downwards, again separating the fabric at both sides of the fly as he unzipped. He was wearing black undershorts; he was aware that Lois liked him in black, although that hadn't been the motivation behind his choice of that particular item that morning. The zipper undone, he slid his hands under the waistband of the jeans and began to push the fabric slowly down over his hips.

Lois watched intently as Clark's hands eased under his jeans, tugging them downwards. She was aware that he was doing this on purpose,

deliberately trying to drive her crazy. A rational part of her brain was highly impressed at this tactic; for someone who had been afraid that his inexperience would put her off, he was proving to be an expert at manipulating her response to him. The jeans moved slowly down Clark's body, exposing his undershorts completely to her gaze. She had been right: he *did* look fantastic in black, although she had originally been thinking of his black jeans and shirt when she had told him so. The cotton shorts clung revealingly to his hips and strained at the front as his arousal made itself evident.

Clark stepped out of the jeans and left them on the floor; he then turned back to Lois, regarding her with hooded eyes heavy with desire. This too was a tactic, she had concluded; apart from one or two brief glances he had refused to meet her gaze as he had strip-teased for her. Not that he would be unaware of how he was affecting her, she knew; her heart-rate had certainly increased, and she already knew that he listened to that sometimes. She now met his eyes, the deep brown of his almost black with suppressed sexual anticipation. He wanted her every bit as much as she did him. But he was still going to make her wait...

She reached out towards him, intending to draw him over to the bed. But he stepped backwards with an "Uh-uh" sound, making it clear that he was calling the shots.

His hands then went to the waistband of his shorts, fingers slipping underneath the band and sliding around to the back, and then returning to the front. Lois longed to crawl over to him, kneel in front of him and tug them off with her teeth. But somehow she knew that he wasn't going to let her do that. Well, if that was the way he wanted to play it... She forced herself to lie back against the pillows, trying to school her expression to appear calm.

Clark smiled to himself as he saw Lois settle herself back against the pillows. She was trying not to let him see just how much his behaviour was turning her on... well, it was a bit late for that. He had detected her much-increased heart rate, as well as the sharp fluctuations each time he had done something new. Her eyes were glazed over with arousal, and - now that he was getting used to her responses - with his enhanced senses he could smell her arousal. A wicked grin curved about his features. Let's see how long her pretended indifference lasts, he thought.

He allowed his hands to slide under his waistband again, one curving over his buttock as he negligently turned sideways to allow Lois to see what he was doing. Pretending not to look at her, he moistened his lips with his tongue as he turned back towards her, and then allowed his other hand to close over his erection, drawing his fingers up and down over himself. He heard the sharp intake of breath as *that* action registered, and he allowed his tongue to appear again, this time licking his lips more lasciviously. The significance of that gesture was not lost on Lois either, he recognised, noticing the way her body shifted under the bedclothes and... yes... her hands had also slid downwards.

Time to move this onwards, he thought, gripping the waistband of his shorts again and in slow, graceful movements slid them down over his hips. He allowed the soft fabric to fall to the floor before straightening to face Lois, naked, with his fully aroused penis bobbing gently in her direction. She was gazing at him now, a lustful

expression on her face, and as he took the first step towards her she threw back the bedclothes.

"What took you so long?" she murmured huskily, as he slid in beside her.

He laughed softly. "Are you telling me you didn't enjoy it? Because, my sexy fiancee, I know that's not true!"

Her hand closed around his member, commencing a slow and loving caress. "Yeah, I did - but you were driving me wild!"

Clark lowered his head and covered her lips with his, effectively preventing any further conversation. His little strip-tease had excited him every bit as much as it had her, and he was anxious to satisfy them both... Her arms closed around him, holding her tightly against her as they lay face-to-face on the big bed. Lois met his kiss hungrily, her tongue thrusting into his mouth in imitation of another movement she craved. She slid one hand down his spine, enjoying the smooth feel of his skin and the hard muscle beneath; as her fingers caressed his buttock she felt his penis jerk against her thigh.

"Loisss... I need you," he hissed against her mouth.

"Me too," she confessed, breaking off the kiss. He moved back, leaning up on one elbow, and gently encouraged her to lie on her back; he then slid his free hand down over her rounded belly and between her legs. Her body quivered as he found her little nub and caressed it with his index finger; two other fingers moved lower and slid inside her.

Lois gasped. "Clark! I - want - you!" she exclaimed.

He moved swiftly into a kneeling position between her spread thighs, reaching for a pillow to place underneath her hips. Again exhibiting the same care for her comfort as he had the first time, Clark moved forward and slid himself into her; again, she made it clear that she was not looking for gentleness. His thrusts became hard, forceful; his expression was that mix of pleasure and pain which Lois had never seen on his face at any other time. Her breathing became even more shallow as his thrusts drove her closer to climax.

"Loooisss... I can't... not much longer..." he gasped, his face almost a tortured mask. She deliberately squeezed him, enjoying his shocked expression. His body jerked, and the movement drove her over the edge. The ripples of her orgasm were too much for Clark to take, and he pumped his climax into her.

He quickly rolled over so that he was lying beside her, anxious not to crush her; languorously she wrapped her arms around him again, enjoying the sensation of their damp, sated bodies pressed against each other. They whispered words of love and exchanged kisses until both fell asleep.

Lois glanced at her watch again as she paced around the kitchen, even though it was less than five minutes since she had last consulted it. Where **was** Clark? He had left the Planet in the late afternoon,

coming up to her desk first to whisper in her ear that there was a hostage situation at City Hall and he needed to help. Lois had wished him luck, feeling chagrined that she would not be dashing over there in a cab to cover the story. But she, Clark and Perry had an agreement: now that she was a little over five weeks away from her due date, she would not leave the Planet offices for a story unless it was a pre-arranged interview.

They fuss too much, she had thought as she had watched Clark hurry into the stairwell; but a small part of her agreed that the arrangement was sensible. Regardless of the casual way in which she had frequently regarded her own safety, the safety and well-being of her daughter or son had to be paramount. Clark's daughter or son as well, she had reminded herself, smiling in spite of herself as she remembered thinking all those months ago that Clark would make a great father. As an expectant father, he was earning himself an alpha-plus rating so far.

In the almost four weeks since she had moved into his apartment, he had arranged a corner of their bedroom for the baby; he had flown to Smallville to collect his old crib, which Jonathan had fixed up and painted, and assembled it in the bedroom; and he had also taken her out to choose a changing-table and other items of baby furniture. The baby's area was now all ready, and the crib had been brightened up by a quilt sewn by Martha, some soft toys, and a mobile which Clark had suspended from the ceiling.

They had talked about buying a house, but had agreed to wait until after the baby was born; even if they found somewhere they liked now there was no guarantee that the purchase would have gone through before Lois delivered. They had had numerous discussions about finances; Clark, the cautious one, concerned about what they could afford and how much they would need for costs like daycare; Lois, a little more adventurous, suggesting loans for particular expenses. They had a pretty good idea of what mortgage repayments they could afford, and were looking forward to house-hunting.

As well as preparing the nest, as Lois had laughingly called it, they had also arranged their wedding. It had taken a little longer than Clark had hoped, which was more to do with Ellen Lane than his parents' inability to leave the farm any earlier. Lois's mother had insisted that her pregnancy was no excuse for her not to dress up and have a 'proper' wedding; her daughter was not going to have ten minutes in a registry office if Ellen had anything to do with it! Besides, as Ellen had insisted to Clark when Lois had had to go to the bathroom, a quiet registry office wedding would look as if they *had* to get married and were ashamed. Clark hadn't seen that argument at all; as far as he was concerned, he and Lois loved each other and wanted to marry each other. What anyone else thought about their wedding, or Lois's pregnancy, was of no concern to him, and, he thought, to Lois either. Still, he had considered that perhaps Lois ought to have more of a traditional ceremony to remember - and the idea appealed to him as well. He had vetoed some of Ellen's more over-the-top suggestions, such as two hundred guests, a massed choir and white doves. They wanted their family and closest friends, a simple ceremony - a small choir would be nice, there were some choral anthems which Clark loved and felt would be very appropriate - and each other.

So the ceremony was due to take place in two days' time. Lois's dress

was hanging in a closet at her mother's apartment, Ellen having persuaded her to spend her last night before the wedding there instead of at Clark's place. Lois secretly thought that suggestion a bit ridiculous since she had been living with Clark for almost a month, but he had encouraged her to agree, commenting that it might actually bring mother and daughter closer together. He also pointed out that his parents would be with him on the morning of the wedding, as well as Jimmy who was acting as Clark's best man. Jimmy had been delighted to be asked, and this had made up for his hurt at having been excluded, as he'd felt, from their news.

"A bit of male bonding, huh?" Lois had teased softly.

"What, me and my mom?" he had replied, deliberately misunderstanding.

She had punched at his bicep in a teasing gesture, only to end up rubbing her fist; Clark had grinned and observed that he would have thought she'd know better than to try that any more.

Lois now looked at her watch yet again; Clark had been gone for almost three hours, and the hostage situation had been over within half an hour of his arrival. Where **was** he? She had initially thought that he had decided to do a patrol, as he frequently did when he'd been out at one emergency, but once an hour had ticked by she had concluded that he must have been needed somewhere else. But a scour of the news channels on TV and radio had drawn a blank; nothing about Superman past the hostage crisis at City Hall, and no reports of anything else which Superman might be involved in.

Clark flew over the city, intending to make one final patrol before heading home to Lois. She should be back at his apartment by now, he thought; she had over the past month or so reluctantly agreed to work shorter hours so that she could rest in the evenings. He hadn't had to exert much persuasion to encourage her to stick to this resolve, in fact: she had by this stage in her pregnancy begun to feel very tired by late afternoons. They still hadn't come to any clear conclusion about when Lois should commence her maternity leave, however; now that she was about five weeks away from her expected delivery date, Clark wanted her to be able to get as much rest as possible and had been encouraging her to start her leave in about two weeks' time. Lois had been less enthusiastic, arguing that she would be bored stupid hanging around at home all day.

"Clark, now that I'm mostly just working on op-ed pieces and background articles for stories you're investigating, it's not that difficult for me to stay at my desk all day. Or to work at home, come to that, if I really feel lazy. So let me work for as long as I feel I can, okay?"

He had agreed, though with a secret determination to try to change her mind if he thought that she was getting too worn out, or if her gynaecologist recommended that she take some time off before the birth. He had accompanied Lois to her last couple of ante-natal check-ups, taking great pleasure in being able officially to identify himself as the father, and had been immensely relieved to discover that all was well with Lois and the baby. He was also relieved at one

other thing: so far as the gynaecologist and the assisting technicians could tell, the baby was perfectly normal. Although Clark was aware that he himself had not started to manifest any signs of being different until he was eight or so, he had been a little nervous that something might show up in the tests to indicate that this baby was in some way different. So far so good - although he and Lois would have to do some fast thinking in order to figure out an explanation for why they didn't want their child's blood tested, later on. Not that anyone - to Clark's knowledge - held any samples of Superman's blood or DNA, but he didn't want to take that chance, or the risk that cell samples would be revealed as distinctly different to any known human patterns.

His attention was distracted by the sight of a cable repairman on the roof of a high-rise apartment building: the man's movements looked a little unsteady and Clark's instinct suggested to him that there could be trouble. Sure enough, the repairman moved closer to the edge of the building to secure a wire, and with a yell lost his balance. Diving downwards, Superman caught the hapless repairman before he had fallen more than a couple of storeys and gently floated him down to ground level.

Having accepted the thanks of the very shaken man and warned him to be more careful with heights, Clark took off again, musing on the sometimes careless attitude exhibited by humans to their own vulnerability. He, who was invulnerable, could afford to be uncaring, but these Earthbound creatures were so fragile: one fall from a height, one trip in front of a passing car, one release of a bullet from a shotgun, could put a period to someone's existence. That knowledge had always made him very protective of Lois: over-protective, he was aware that she considered it. But then, Lois had been used to taking care of herself, even in life-and-death situations, long before *he* had appeared on the scene; and yet, within the first week they had met, he had saved her from certain death in a chemicals explosion and again on board the Prometheus. Small wonder he considered that she needed him around to ensure that she stayed alive; and small wonder, perhaps, that she didn't quite understand the anxiety he frequently felt on her behalf. She had no need to worry about his safety, after all, and even before she had known that he was Superman, Clark Kent hadn't exactly made a habit of 'dangling unprotected over the jaws of death', as he had described her occasional working habits. Clark saw examples of the real frailty of human life every day; the thought that one of those days the lifeless victim he had just discovered might turn out to be Lois haunted his worst nightmares.

He had tried to explain this to her a week or so ago, when she had become irritated at what she complained was his attempts to control her; she had seemed to understand to a degree - at any rate, she had agreed not to attend the rendezvous which had been the subject of their argument. And at the moment - although he hadn't said it for fear that she might interpret his motives as being entirely for the baby's sake - he was worried about both Lois and their unborn child.

Their child. He smiled broadly as his powerful body cut through the clouds above Metropolis. In less than six weeks they would be parents. He was looking forward to holding their baby in his arms, although he was also full of trepidation. Would they be good parents? How would they manage to return to a normal life afterwards - or

would they be able to? Neither of them had a nine-to-five job, and since they were both investigative journalists it would be difficult to combine childcare with the kind of hours they were both used to keeping. Clark didn't want to lose his working partner, but he found it difficult to see how they could both work on the same stories and take care of the baby, no matter how accommodating Perry was being. All-night stakeouts were out, for a start - at least, with each other for company. So Clark could go, with someone else, perhaps; but Lois would hate that. Clark, though, had absolutely no objection to remaining home with their child - but the major fly in the ointment there was Superman. Supposing a situation arose which required Superman's assistance?

To an extent, Clark felt little difficulty in resolving that dilemma: his first duty was to his family, and that was non-negotiable. But supposing it was a major emergency? And that without Superman's help there would be serious loss of life - and he couldn't get Lois back in time?

They would have to talk about these kind of questions, Clark acknowledged. Lois had so far been far more accepting than he had any right to expect of the demands on his time due to his Super-persona. All right, she had been a little impatient when his Super-hearing had heard a news report from the radio of a passing car that evening a couple of weeks ago when they had been just about to make love, but that was entirely understandable - he had been pretty fed up himself and had been rather abrupt in his handling of the incident, not bothering with any subtleties in grabbing hold of the criminals and dumping them right in front of the surprised police officers. Not that his haste had done him any good: on his way back to his apartment he had spotted a truck carrying dangerous chemicals overturned on of the main routes into the city, and had felt obliged to stop and deal with the spillage before anyone was harmed.

Recalling himself to the present, he shifted direction to head towards the apartment. Lois would be wondering where he was, he thought; she would know that the hostage situation hadn't required much time or effort on his part. The gang members had not appeared to Clark to be particularly intelligent: unlike similar situations where his help had been required, these individuals had not appeared to anticipate that the Man of Steel might intervene. There had been no bombs, no devices primed to cause devastation elsewhere in the city if Superman didn't back off; they simply appeared to have guns which they kept trained on their victims as their leader stated his demands over the telephone to the Mayor and Police Chief. Clark, after a brief consultation with these luminaries, had flown over the building for an X-ray inspection, then had returned to explain his chosen course of action. Seconds later, the surprised gang members were recovering from the hurricane which had shattered the picture window in the board room where they had their hostages under guard, and were realising in shock that the ferocious wind had somehow removed their guns from their now-shaking hands. The 'hurricane' had been explained when Superman had strode swiftly back into the room to round up the perpetrators and escort them outside to the waiting police officers. The hostages had all seemed to be fine, if a little shocked, and Clark had only waited long enough to give a brief statement and to check City Hall for any remaining weapons.

But that had been over two hours ago; as usual when Clark was anxious

to get back after a Superman exploit, other things happened to delay him. Besides the cable repairman, he had spotted a heavy-goods vehicle spinning out of control on the freeway, and had whisked it to safety on the hard shoulder before an accident could occur. There had also been a vessel in distress in Metropolis Harbour, and a fire in the basement of a hostel which a quick application of Super-breath had extinguished before any real harm had been done.

Time to get back to Lois, and the professionals can deal with any other emergencies for the next few hours, Clark told himself as he put on a further burst of speed. But his Super-hearing picked up an odd sound and he listened for a moment, trying to establish what it was.

A small plane, with engine trouble by the sound of it. He grimaced. That was something he couldn't ignore, he realised, and he changed direction, heading towards the sound.

Lois paced the apartment, conflicting thoughts running through her mind. Clark would be fine - of course he would! He was Superman - how could he be in any trouble? But on the other hand, she and Clark had made plans for this evening, their final evening together in his apartment before their wedding; they had arrangements to talk through, and they had both simply wanted to spend the time on their own before their parents appeared on the scene.

Of course, Clark couldn't help it if Superman was needed somewhere, although he had assured Lois earlier that day that he would only go out if it was a real emergency and the emergency services couldn't cope without him. So surely, unless something really terrible had happened, he would have been home? But if something really awful *had* happened, it would have been on the news reports? Or at the very least, on the police scanner; but she had called Jimmy at the Planet, trying not to reveal her genuine concern, and said that she was wondering whether something had come up that Clark might be covering, since he wasn't yet home. Jimmy had confirmed Lois's suspicions, that he had never returned from City Hall, although it seemed he *had* phoned in a story about ten minutes after the kidnappers had been arrested. Jimmy also assured Lois that he hadn't heard anything unusual on the police scanner. So that covered both angles: there was nothing important for Superman to be dealing with, and Clark hadn't been sent out on a breaking story.

So where was he? She walked out onto the balcony, wrapping her arms around herself as the chilly evening air hit her. Straining her eyes to see as much of the dark, cloudy Metropolis skyline as she could, she could see no trace of red and blue.

That plane was definitely in trouble, Clark confirmed as he drew closer. A faint trail of black smoke emerged from its single engine, and its flight path was distinctly unsteady. As he drew closer, he was surprised to note that there appeared to be some writing on its fuselage, but he ignored that for the time being and concentrated on formulating a plan to get the plane and its pilot safely down and preventing that engine from exploding. He drew level with the cockpit, with the intention of signalling to the pilot that help was

at hand; but the cockpit was empty. He frowned, puzzled, then realised that the plane must have been flying by remote control. But why...? And the cause of the engine trouble?

Deciding that regardless of the lack of a pilot he still couldn't allow the plane to crash and cause damage and possibly injury, he drew back to deal with the engine. The writing on the fuselage caught his eye. He had simply assumed it to be some sort of identification for the plane's owners, but it wasn't.

A cold hand closed about his heart as he read the words.

"Superman! We have Lois Lane. Come to the FineFair warehouse on Fourth and Morton or she dies."

Forgetting the plane, Clark shifted gear to light-speed. Behind him, the plane crashed to the ground, sending a burst of flames and black smoke into the air.

Lois padded back into the apartment, grabbing one of Clark's sweaters from the bedroom - as much for the smell of him from it as for the warmth it offered, and again picked up the phone. Clark's desk phone at the Planet simply connected to voice-mail, and she clicked the disconnector before tapping in the number of his mobile phone. It was still switched off. She had paged his beeper earlier, but had no way of knowing whether the message had got through: only the previous day Clark had commented that his beeper seemed to be working erratically, and he had intended to get it replaced.

Was this what it was going to be like married to Superman?

Clark reached the warehouse in under a minute, landing noiselessly by the entrance. The road was deserted; business hours had ended over an hour ago and in this district very few people would have legitimate business in the area after dark. His heart still barely recovered from the shock of the message painted on the plane's fuselage, he strode for the door, wrenching it open with one sharp tug. Afterwards, he would chide himself for not at least X-raying the premises first, but all he could think about was Lois.

He was surprised to find that the interior appeared to be deserted. A few dusty metal shelves were scattered around the room, and several packing crates were stacked in a couple of corners. There was little natural light; the few high windows were grimy with years of accumulated dirt and anyway, it was dark outside.

But Clark's senses could hear at least one heartbeat apart from his own, and he quickly scanned the one large room which was the warehouse's interior. A figure hid behind a group of crates.

Clark spoke commandingly, in a voice which had been known to terrify any number of would-be criminals. "I can see you hiding there. You might as well come out."

The figure moved, strolling nonchalantly out from its hiding place.

"Superman. So good of you to drop by."

"Luthor!" Clark knew he had been right to be worried. "What have you done with Lois Lane?"

"It's so good to see that you feel such civic concern for the citizens of Metropolis, Superman," Lex Luthor continued, as if Clark hadn't spoken. "Or am I right and it really is purely concern for Lois Lane? Too bad for you that she chose that nonentity, Clark Kent."

Clark ignored Luthor's jibes, and demanded again, his voice cold and furious, "Where is Lois?"

Luthor shrugged. "How should I know? At home with her fiance, I expect. Oh, you expected to find her here, in danger?"

Clark began to turn, intent on striding out of the warehouse and home to Lois. Was she all right? Had this evil megalomaniac set in process some means of harming her in their own apartment?

"Leaving so soon, Superman? How very impolite of you," Luthor continued in a smooth drawl. "And before you've even had a chance to see what I've brought for you."

Clark glanced back without slowing his pace; Luthor had picked up a small container which had sat atop one of the crates. Pausing, Clark tried to X-ray it, realising too late that the small metal box was actually made of lead. His instincts, already screaming at him to get out of there, increased their efforts until he could barely hear any external sounds. He began to walk towards the door again. It slammed in front of him, and he realised that two other men now stood just inside.

"Do you really think that these - escapees from a wrestling match - could keep me here?" Clark spat sarcastically. "I'm warning you, Luthor, Lois Lane better be all right, or you will regret the day you ever heard of me."

"Oh, I have something here which will ensure that you don't go anywhere, Superman," Luthor replied, lifting the lid of the box.

Clark staggered backwards as the pain hit him in waves. He didn't need to see the green rock to know exactly what it was that Luthor had.

Kryptonite.

He tried to drag together the reserves of his strength, to bolt for the door and crash his way through it. But Luthor was advancing on him and the pain was getting worse by the split second. His entire body appeared to be on fire, and he could barely put one foot in front of the other.

"No... Lois... let me out... No!" Overcome by pain, Clark collapsed to the floor.

The silence in the apartment was shattered by the sound of the telephone ringing. Lois ran to answer it, speaking breathlessly into the receiver. "Clark?"

"Lois, honey? Are you all right?"

Lois's hopes fell again. "Oh, hi, Martha."

"What's wrong? Is Clark there?"

"No - he went to help at a hostage situation a few hours ago, and he's not back yet," Lois replied, trying to sound much more upbeat than she actually felt.

"Oh, he's probably helping out somewhere else, honey - you know what it can be like for him, it's just one emergency after another," Martha replied cheerfully.

Lois tried to take comfort from her mother-in-law to be's tone. "I know, Martha, and I'm sure I'm just being silly. I mean, Superman's hardly going to get in any kind of trouble, is he?"

"Clark can look after himself, you know that, honey." Martha's tone oozed reassurance. "He'll probably be home very soon, and he'll have some story about something he just had to help with. You'll see."

"Yeah, I guess you're right," Lois agreed, with more confidence than she felt. "So what time are you guys getting in to Metropolis tomorrow?"

"Our flight's due to land at eleven, so we'll be with you by twelve," Martha answered.

Lois interrupted, "But we'll meet you at the airport, of course - we have my Jeep, so you won't need a cab."

"Well, if you're both sure," Martha replied. "But don't worry if you can't. If we don't see you there, we'll make our own way to the apartment."

"Okay. We're really looking forward to seeing you and Jonathan," Lois answered, her attention only half focused on this conversation.

"Oh, we are too, honey," Martha assured her. "And the wedding's going to be just great. We're meeting your folks tomorrow evening, right?"

"Right." Lois mechanically went over the arrangements for the following day with Martha, secretly wanting to end the conversation so that she could try calling Clark again. Finally, it seemed, she was able to replace the receiver; immediately she picked it up again and dialled. Again, no answer from Clark's cellphone.

In the farmhouse in Smallville, Martha Kent pressed the button to disconnect her cordless phone and hurried to find her husband.

"Jonathan, I think Clark's in trouble."

"Trouble? What kind of trouble?" Jonathan Kent asked, frowning.

"I don't know," his usually placid wife answered. "All I know is, he's not at home, Lois says she was expecting him back hours ago, and there's nothing on the news about Superman helping anywhere. And I don't think it's like Lois to get this upset over nothing."

"It's not like Clark to leave her on her own - he told me only the other day that he's spending as much time as possible with her now she's only a month away from her time," Jonathan said thoughtfully. "I guess Lois **might** be over-reacting - after all, she is eight months pregnant, she's bound to be a little over-anxious..."

"Jonathan Kent, what would you know about it?" his wife demanded, her hands on her hips. "Lois is a very sensible young woman, we both know that," Martha added more soberly. "If she's worried, I think maybe we should be too."

"What do you want to do?" Jonathan asked simply.

Martha looked determined. "I'll call the airline, see if we can get on an earlier flight."

Lying on the floor of the warehouse, Clark cursed himself over and over again for his carelessness in failing to check out the situation before charging into the warehouse. It had been a classic Luthor bluff; he assumed - or at least, he **hoped** - that Lois was perfectly all right. Except that she would be at home, wondering where on earth he'd got to.

After he'd fallen to the floor, Luthor's goons had grabbed hold of him and, producing thick chains from somewhere, had wrapped them several times around him, ensuring that he was unable to move. Once he was secured, Luthor had then stepped up and fastened the Kryptonite, which was itself attached to a short chain, to one of the chains binding Clark. Yet more waves of pain had washed over him as the Kryptonite came into contact with his body.

"Why?" he had managed to gasp as Luthor straightened.

"Why not?" Luthor had shrugged. "You've been a worthy opponent, Superman, but lately you have been getting more than a little... annoying. It simply occurred to me that it was time to eliminate you - and once I managed to get hold of this little item, the conditions were perfect."

Luthor had stepped back. "Do have a nice death, Superman." He and his associates had then left, and Clark had heard the sound of a padlock being secured on the door.

He had tried, then, to summon up any remaining energy in order to break the chains and struggle to his feet, but the Kryptonite's debilitating effect had been too much. After several minutes of trying he had collapsed back on the floor, moaning in pain. Even his first contact with Kryptonite, at his parents' farm almost a year ago, hadn't hurt this much.

He was well and truly trapped. Unable to do anything to help himself, imprisoned in what appeared to be a deserted warehouse, in a part of the city which seemed to be completely deserted at this time of the night, and no-one knew where he was. Unless he could figure a way out of the situation, he was going to be dead by morning.

Desperately trying to fight the pain, he yelled, "Help!" Not surprisingly, no-one answered. But he couldn't give up that easily, he knew; he might be unable to move, but he still had his voice. He carried on shouting, though his voice grew weaker as the minutes passed and his pain increased.

'Lois! I'm sorry, Lois,' were his final thoughts as he lapsed into unconsciousness.

By nine pm Lois couldn't stand it any longer. There was still no response from Clark's mobile, and she couldn't tell whether or not his beeper was working. There was still nothing on any news report about Superman. And she was worried sick.

She had tried to think the problem through rationally. Superman was missing, but Superman was not exactly the kind of person to fade into the background: if he was out somewhere, he would be seen. So either he was somewhere hidden, or he wasn't out as Superman. That seemed to make some sort of sense: what if it was **Clark** who was missing, not Superman? That would explain why no-one seemed to know where he was - a Superman in trouble would be noticed, would get reported, but Clark might conceivably be overlooked if he was lying hurt somewhere.

Lois couldn't really figure out why Clark would have gone somewhere as himself rather than coming home - he would have called her, surely, if something had happened on one of his stories which he'd needed to check out. And neither Jimmy nor Perry knew of any breaking story which he would have had to cover. As far as they knew, he'd quit for the evening.

Slipping out of the apartment, Lois hailed a cab to take her to the Planet building; at eight months pregnant she'd had to give up driving. At the Planet, she quickly went across to Clark's desk and booted up his computer, ignoring the curious glances of the few reporters working the night shift. While the computer went through its logging-on process, she also checked the messages on his voice-mail: one from a source about a financial scam which she'd known Clark was working on, one from his bank manager about quotes for a life insurance policy which Clark must have asked for - he's taking out **life insurance,** Lois thought in incredulity; **Clark?** Does he realise he'll have to undergo a medical? - and her own message, which she'd left three hours earlier. No clues there.

She then loaded his word processing software, scanning the directory of files though without any very clear idea of what she was looking for. She was pretty much aware of the stories Clark was working on at the moment; even though for the most part she was unable to work with him, he still discussed his work with her, both of them enjoying the opportunity to bounce ideas off each other. None of the files in the 'current investigations' directory yielded any clues as to anything

which might take Clark away from his fiancee less than two days before their wedding.

Lois's eye then alighted on a directory labelled 'LL investigation'. LL? she questioned curiously. Was Clark investigating *her*? He couldn't be! Then it occurred to her that LL also stood for Lex Luthor. She double-clicked on the directory, only to discover that it was password-protected. "Why do you do that, Clark?" she muttered in irritation. "You know I'll still break into it if I want to!"

She made several attempts at the password. Her own favourite, 'Superman', didn't work, nor did combinations of 'Kent', 'Smallville', 'Lex Luthor' and - a guess at the spelling - Kal-El. She even tried her own name - 'Lois Lane' - without success, which made her grunt in frustration. "Clark! I *know* that was your password a few months ago!" she grumbled under her breath. Inspiration struck her then, and she typed, 'Lois Lane Kent'.

Password accepted.

"Clark! You *said* you didn't expect me to change my name!" she gritted as she scanned the list of files in the directory. They appeared to cover several different angles: Luthor's finances, Luthor's early business interests, his associates, identifiable criminal acts, and a final file called 'Superman and LL'. Curiously, Lois double-clicked on that one, only to discover that it was also password-protected.

"Darn you, Clark Kent - what is this, Fort Knox?" she muttered, drawing some more curious glances from the reporters seated several desks away. She ignored them and tried the various combinations again. 'Lois Lane Kent' didn't work this time, nor did her other guesses. She sat back and thought. If Clark was as predictable as she'd always thought he was, this password would be on a similar theme to the other one. But what?

She bit her lip as she frantically tried to think. A few evenings ago, she remembered, they had discussed possible names for the baby, and she had discovered that, contrary to her expectations, Clark wanted a little girl. Not that he would be disappointed with a son, he assured Lois, but he could really see the two of them with a daughter who looked just like Lois. And they had suggested a couple of names - what was it they had both liked? She racked her brain. Yes, that was it! She quickly typed, 'Katherine Lara Lane Kent.'

Password accepted.

"Told you I'd got you all figured out, Clark Kent," Lois murmured exultantly as the file opened. She quickly scanned down the text, which was in a series of bullet-pointed paragraphs, each added on a different date. It appeared that Superman had had a series of encounters with Lex Luthor, some accidental, as when Luthor had turned out to be at the bottom of some problem or other, and some deliberate, where Clark had decided to confront Luthor. A few of these confrontations appeared to have taken place over the past few weeks; Lois realised that the earliest of these had occurred the days after her conversation with Clark on the way to collect her engagement ring. It was then that they had decided to look into

Luthor's affairs; for some reason best known to himself, Clark must have decided that Superman needed to pay rather more attention to Luthor's activities.

So Superman has been trying to warn Luthor off, Lois thought, frowning. What did Clark think he was going to achieve? Luthor's not the type to give up that easily. Did Clark think Luthor might get careless and let some vital evidence slip? As far as she could figure it, the only thing Clark's actions would have achieved was to make Luthor consider that Superman was a nuisance.

And if Luthor decided that, what could he possibly do about it, Lois puzzled. Superman is invulnerable - Luthor couldn't possibly hurt him. She sat back in Clark's chair and thought through the options. Luthor could try something like that winter heatwave which had almost made Superman - Clark, she realised suddenly - leave Metropolis a year ago. Or he could threaten to hurt someone Superman cared about. Lois paused for a moment. Some months ago she might have been seen as the obvious candidate there; after all, she used to scoop a large number of Superman exclusives (only rivalled by Clark, and she could understand that now), and Superman had been known to drop everything and rush to the rescue of Lois Lane when necessary. However, over the past six months there had been much less of an obvious connection between Lois and Superman, which she was now quite grateful for; there had been much less surprise when she and Clark had announced their engagement as a result.

So what could Luthor do to Superman? Assuming he's done anything, Lois reminded herself. She could very possibly be clutching at straws here. Just because Clark seemed to have been acting a little recklessly in letting Luthor know that Superman didn't trust him and was on to some of his less pleasant activities, that didn't mean that Clark's disappearance had anything to do with the head of LexCorp.

But what if it had? After all, that was the only lead Lois had to go on at present. She considered calling Luthor; she still had his private number and she was pretty sure he'd speak to her. He had no reason to suspect that she was aware of any of his less legal activities. But what could she say? It wasn't as if she could ask him straight out, Have you kidnapped Superman? No, better not to arouse Luthor's suspicions by contacting him.

So what else could she do? For want of any other ideas, she switched over to one of the Planet's major databases and searched under property ownership, entering variously 'Lex Luthor', 'LexCorp', 'LexComm', 'Luthor Industries' and 'LNN'. In all, Luthor - directly or indirectly - owned a vast amount of property in Metropolis, Lois realised. Searching all of these premises for Clark would be like looking for a needle in a haystack... but if that was what it would take, that was what she would do. But she realised that it could also be counter-productive: what if someone saw a nosy reporter poking around premises owned by Luthor? It wouldn't be too long before a message got through to Luthor himself or to one of his senior associates... Asabi, she remembered, and an Englishman with a strange name... Nigel St John.

So that idea was probably out. What else could she do?

For want of a better idea, she pulled up the LNN website and idly

watched the tickertape scroll by, just in case there was now news of Superman's whereabouts. At the same time, she picked up Clark's phone and again called his beeper. Again, it seemed to accept the page, but as Lois knew, the problem with Clark's beeper at the moment was that callers could believe that pages were going through, but he didn't necessarily receive the page.

One item on the tickertape caught her attention. A small single-engined plane had come down and crashed into a small block of apartments near the financial district, and the resulting explosion had caused a fire and damage to the apartments. Lois frowned; that was just the sort of situation Clark would go to help with. Was it possible...?

She picked up the telephone again and this time dialled the police precinct nearest the accident scene. On finally managing to be put through to an officer who had attended the accident, she pretended to be investigating the incident, and went through the motions of asking the usual questions. After several minutes, she finally slipped in the question she really needed an answer to.

"Was Superman there?"

"Naaah! Hey, we can manage on our own every now and then, y'know - we don't always need Mr Blue Suit," the detective protested. Lois was about to end the call, having decided that this was another dead end, when the detective spoke again. "Hey, you said you're Lois Lane, didn't you? There was something about that plane..."

"What was that?" Lois asked, only partly listening; her mind working furiously to think of another means of tracking Clark down.

"Your name was on the fuselage - or at least, it could have been your name," the detective answered. "I could see Something O. I. S. and then L. A. N. and what could've been an E - the rest was burned black."

Lois frowned, puzzled; why would her name be on the fuselage of an aircraft? A nagging sensation in her brain encouraged her to check this one out. "Is the plane still at the scene?" she asked.

"Unless the recovery people have come for it, I guess so," the detective replied.

"Okay - look, I want to come and have a look at it," Lois stated firmly. "Can you let whoever's there know and make sure I have clearance?"

The detective at first seemed a little reluctant, but eventually gave in under Lois's persistence. Finishing the call at last, she then phoned down to the night security desk, asking the duty guard to call her a cab. She then hurried to her own desk, digging in the drawer to collect a slim torch, a pocket-knife and what she called her 'tool-kit' - a collection of blades, wires, hairpins and several other little items which tended to come in handy if she was indulging in a spot of breaking and entering. Precisely why she might need these she was unsure; but better safe than sorry.

Clark had been drifting in and out of consciousness for the past couple of hours, although he was barely aware of the passage of time. He knew that a certain amount of time *had* passed, because what little dusky light had crept in through the grimy windows had now disappeared entirely and he could see nothing except the glow of the Kryptonite. With the disappearance of his Super-powers had also gone his ability to see in the dark, and he lay on the floor, in intense pain, freezing cold and unable to see his surroundings.

So this is what it feels like to be close to death, he mused between the waves of pain. It was something he had never really given much thought to before; even in his previous encounter with Kryptonite he hadn't actually considered that he might die from the exposure. Sure, it had been pretty horrible for the few minutes his Dad had left that chest open; he had been writhing on the floor of the barn in agony. But once the lid had been closed and his parents had helped him back into the house, the pain had eased; the only difference then had been his lack of powers and the shock of actually sneezing a little the following day. The only other time he had felt even close to dying had been on his return journey after stopping the asteroid; even then, in the recesses of his brain he had been confident that once he got to Lois's apartment she would help him. And she had.

This was different; this time he knew the Kryptonite was killing him. It was almost as if he could feel its insidious and destructive effect on his nervous system, eating away at his lowered defences and destroying his immune system. The pain had been present for so long that he had now forgotten how it felt *not* to be in pain. Writhing on the floor once again, he wondered how long he had; how much longer before the remnant of his home planet brought an end to his existence.

Did it really matter? he answered himself. After all, it could only be a matter of hours; and he was unlikely to be found before morning, if even then considering that this warehouse was clearly disused. If he had no hope of getting out of here alive, then better that the end was sooner rather than later.

But there was Lois... and their baby.

Lois would probably be frantic about him by now, Clark realised. She wouldn't have a clue what had happened to him, until he was found. Whenever that happened! And they were due to get married in thirty-six hours - would she know by then that he was dead? She would be alone, with their baby; she would be on her own giving birth.

No, she wouldn't, he corrected himself - his parents would never let her go through that experience on her own, nor would Sam and Ellen Lane. Lois would be taken care of, Clark realised, feeling a little reassured. He would miss seeing his child born; he would never know if it was a boy or a girl; his son or daughter would never know its father. But Lois would tell him or her all about Clark Kent - perhaps about Superman as well. Would the child have his powers? If so, he hoped that this piece of Kryptonite got destroyed, and that there was no more in existence. He hated the thought of his child some day suffering the same fate.

He moaned aloud as the pain increased; his head felt as if it was splitting in two, and every muscle and sinew in his body screamed in

agony. How much longer would this ordeal last?

He wished for unconsciousness. At least that way he would never feel his death approach.

There was a screeching - a beeping - in his head, making the headache far worse. He winced, trying to curl his head into his shoulder as if that would somehow stop the noise. But he suddenly realised that the beeping, whatever it was, was not in his head. It was a sound he recognised, but what was it?

His pager, he realised suddenly.

His pager was beeping. Someone was trying to page him. He had left his pager tucked into one of the secret compartments of his suit. But it hadn't been working... he tried to pierce the fog in which his brain seemed to be enveloped, to concentrate. His beeper had been working intermittently over the past couple of days. Right now, it seemed to be working fine. Someone was trying to page him.

Lois!

She's probably been paging me for hours, he realised. He felt a faint hope stir inside him; Lois was looking for him. The sound of his pager served to let him know that somewhere in the world outside his absence had been noticed. A faint hope stirred inside him, only to be doused at once as he remembered that Lois had absolutely no means of figuring out where he was. She could page him all night, but no-one but himself would hear. And he couldn't let her know where he was. His mobile phone was probably also inside his suit somewhere, but trussed up like a chicken as he was, there was no way he could get to it.

Lois, I love you! he screamed in silent agony.

Lois paid the cab driver and walked as swiftly as she could up to the police tape, flashing her Press ID at the officer guarding it. "Lois Lane - you're expecting me?"

"Yeah," drawled the uniformed officer. "The plane's over this way - not that there's much to see, it's pretty smashed up."

He led the way across the courtyard; unusually for town apartments, this block had a small private car park. Which was probably just as well, Lois thought, surveying the devastation with the aid of the illumination provided by the police spotlights. There were pieces of plane everywhere, and plenty of shattered glass, and even some roof-tiles.

The officer indicated a large chunk of twisted metal. "This is the bit Bartoli told you about. Can't see much there myself, but hey..."

Lois stepped forward, then crouched down beside the large remnant of fuselage. It was about three feet by two in dimension, though the edges were jagged. The metal was steel-grey, but covered with black scorch-marks, and while there was writing on it, it was partially obscured with burns. It also looked as if some of the writing had

been broken off. She scraped at the burned sections with her pocket-knife; it did indeed look as if her name had been spelt out on the metal. But what else was there?

There was something on the section she had, above the OIS LAN. She tried spitting on a handkerchief and using that to clean off some of the scorching, but that didn't help much. The letters were pretty incomplete, but the first could have been an S. The third one had an upright - that could be an I, or a lower-case L, or a T... or a P. Then the next one looked like the bottom half of an upper-case L... or perhaps an E? The next letter was completely unreadable, and then there was something with two uprights and a faint blur in the middle. Could it be an M, Lois wondered? If so, then the word she was looking at could be 'SUPERMAN'. If her hunch was right, that was.

She tried to decipher the rest of the text, but it was even more difficult. There was a 'TO', but that was no darn help at all. The text had clearly continued on along the fuselage, but the remainder was missing. There was a third row of text, however, beneath the part which looked like her name. With some careful cleaning, she could distinguish 'O', an unrecognisable letter followed by 'RT' and a final letter which could have been anything with an upright on the left-hand side. As she tried to make out the following word, which was the final word on the section she had, the officer came up to her.

"Ms Lane? I found this - thought it might be to do with what you're looking for."

Lois glanced up - he was holding what looked like another piece of fuselage, this time about eighteen inches long. To her amazement, it looked like it had come from a section just adjacent to the piece she was examining; there were two lines of partly obscured text on it. The top line was very badly damaged; she could only make out IN and something which could have been I and R. The second line proved easier to read; after some scrubbing and guesswork she could make out the word 'MORTON'.

Morton? Could that be an address? There was a Morton Street somewhere in the old industrial district, wasn't there? And that O, and the RT on the other section... could that be the remainder of the address? What would fit the gap? She racked her brain, eventually deciding that the final letter of the first word could conceivably be a H. And if the first letter was an F... that could make FOURTH.

Fourth and Morton? Was that an intersection? She turned back to the office, who was now watching her with open curiosity. "Does Fourth and Morton mean anything to you?" she demanded.

He shrugged. "Dunno,. Hey, wait a minute - isn't that down in the industrial estate on the way to Hobb's Bay? There are some old warehouses out that way..."

Lois was scrambling to her feet, with some difficulty; the officer eventually realised and offered her his hand. She muttered her thanks and quickly dialled a number on her cellphone, summoning a cab, then paced up and down impatiently by the roadside until one arrived. Giving the driver the address, she proceeded to dial and redial Clark's beeper during the twenty-minute journey.

Be there, Clark, she prayed to herself. Be there... and know I'm coming for you. Hold on, sweetheart, I'm nearly there.

His pager was still beeping every thirty seconds or so; that was the only thing preventing Clark from slipping into unconsciousness and then a deep coma. That, and the cold, he conceded. He had never really felt cold before, and on top of the extreme pain it was too much to bear. He wanted to close his eyes and never wake up again. He wanted all of this agony to go away... he wanted to wake up in his own bed, with Lois beside him.

But that wasn't going to happen.

He was never going to get out of there alive. Nearly thirty years on, the explosion which had killed the inhabitants of his own planet was also going to be the death of him.

And his pager was still beeping.

As the cab drew close to the intersection, Lois asked the driver to go slowly as she searched for a likely building. There were three warehouses near the junction of Fourth and Main, and the one where - she hoped - Clark was could have been any one of them.

If Clark's beeper was working, perhaps she would be able to hear it from the outside.

But... she shuddered as it occurred to her that perhaps Clark wasn't alone - perhaps his captors were with him, and if so, her continual paging of him could put him in even more danger. If he was there as Superman, which she guessed he must be given the message on that plane's fuselage, then any indication that he carried with him the trappings of an ordinary individual might give away his other identity. On the other hand, she reasoned, she didn't know what he did with his street clothes and other paraphernalia when he became Superman - that was a question she hadn't yet got around to asking him. It was entirely possible that his pager wasn't with him.

The warehouse closest to the intersection had an old sign hanging above the entrance; in the cab's headlamps Lois could see that the paint was peeling. She could just about make out the words 'FineFair'; she concentrated for a moment. Could that have been written on the fuselage? Leaning forward, she asked the cab-driver to stop. "If you wait here for me, I'll give you another twenty on top of the fare," she promised, suddenly anxious to ensure that she wasn't abandoned in this deserted part of town. The driver grudgingly agreed, and as she exited he clicked on his radio, tuning it into a sports channel.

Lois hurried up towards the FineFair warehouse, again dialling Clark's pager on her cellphone. The warehouse door was secured with a padlock; she shone her torch at it. Surely the lock was new? Yet if this place was as abandoned as it looked, it was unlikely to have a new lock. She pressed the redial key on her phone again, and listened carefully. Yes, she could hear a faint beeping sound. Clark *was*

there!

Reaching in her bag for her tool-kit, she selected a hairpin and began to pick the lock. Clark, I could do with your skills here, she thought distractedly, and with a wry grimace she realised just why Clark had proven to be better at picking locks than she was. Nothing to do with skill; just judicious use of super-powers.

After several minutes, and a number of scratches on her hand, the padlock gave way, Lois ripped it out of the lock and threw it down, dragging the door open with shaking hands. The interior was dark, but there seemed to be something glowing near the floor about half-way into the warehouse. She groped for her torch and shone it towards the faint light. On the floor something red and blue lay crumpled.

"Clark!" she screamed. Please, don't let me be too late... please...

She ran to his side, instantly seeing the chains wrapped around her fiance. The glowing green rock took her by surprise, but she quickly worked out what it was. She had never seen Kryptonite, but Clark had described it to her. Clark lay on the floor, unmoving, sweat glistening on his face, yet when she touched his hand it was cold.

"Clark? Clark, speak to me!" Her voice was panicky; he was still alive, but just barely, judging by the faint pulse.

"Lois?" The faint whisper was barely audible.

"Clark, it's okay, I've got you, you're safe, it's going to be all right," she crooned, almost sobbing in her relief. She grabbed the Kryptonite, intending to take it away from him, but then realised that it was chained to his bonds. Fumbling in her toolkit again, she found a pliers, and desperately tried to pry and cut the smaller chain away. After a few minutes, she succeeded; during this time, Clark had simply lain on the floor, his eyes staring unseeing up at the ceiling. He appeared barely aware of her presence.

She seized the Kryptonite, intending to get it as far away from Clark as she could. As she stood up, however, a piercing pain stabbed her in the stomach. Dropping the Kryptonite, she almost bent double in agony. Clark's rasping voice cut through her pain.

"Lois... the baby... it's the - Kryptonite - get out of here..."

She stared at him - of course, the Kryptonite was hurting the baby! But regardless of her pain, she couldn't...

"Clark - I'm not leaving you! What can I do with it?"

He was desperately trying to drag himself onto his elbow, the pain the effort was causing him apparent on his face. "He had... a box... lead..."

Clutching her stomach, Lois shone her torch around the dark interior; the shelves and crates made it much more difficult by casting shadows everywhere. But after a moment or two she saw the box, discarded on

the floor. "Thank God... he didn't take it with him," she gasped, staggering over to it. It was heavy, and she dragged it back to where she had dragged the Kryptonite. It took her several seconds to get the piece of rock into the box, while all the time stabbing pains assaulted her womb. At last she succeeded and she slammed down the lid, breathing heavily in exhaustion and pain.

The pain ceased; for several moments she crouched beside Clark, trying to get her breath back. Then she shone her torch over the chains restraining him, trying to see how they were secured. "Another damn padlock!" she gritted, and groped for her tools again. Because she was tired, and her hands hurt, it took her several minutes to open the lock, but finally she succeeded, and she dragged the heavy links away from Clark. Eventually, he was free. He had tried to help her by pulling his heavy body up as she tugged, and as the last section of chain fell away from him he collapsed back on the floor in exhaustion.

Lois threw herself on top of him, sobbing in relief. "Clark... Clark, sweetheart, I've been so worried about you... Thank God I found you in time." His arms closed weakly around her.

It took them some time to get out of there; it was several minutes before Clark was strong enough to get to his feet and lean on her so that he could walk. Then there was the Kryptonite; Lois had no intention of leaving it behind for someone else to use - or even for Luthor or whoever had lured Clark there to find and use again. So she left Clark sitting just inside the warehouse door while she half-carried, half-dragged the lead box to the door, and then called the cab driver to take it and put it in the trunk. She remembered that there had been a blanket in the back of the cab, and she hurried to get it to wrap it around Clark before helping him out to the car, re-locking the padlock at the entrance on the way.

The journey home was accomplished in silence; Clark lay back against the seat-cushions, his eyes closed, while Lois held his hand and tried not to dwell on what might have been. When the cab finally pulled up at their apartment, Lois asked the driver to carry up the box while she helped Clark in. She was surprised to see lights blazing; she knew she hadn't left any on.

As Lois helped Clark slowly up the steps, the door of the apartment swung open to reveal Jonathan and Martha; with a muttered exclamation, Jonathan rushed forward to take Clark's other arm and help him inside. Lois quickly turned to pay off the cab driver, hoping that in the dark he hadn't been able to see the Super-suit under the blanket.

"Lois? What on earth happened?" Martha asked anxiously. "We were worried after I spoke to you, so we got an earlier flight..."

Lois quickly filled in Clark's parents on what she had managed to piece together. Clark, lying slumped on the sofa, interjected at one point to inform them that it had been Lex Luthor who had been behind the attempt on his life. But his voice was weak and faltering, and Martha quickly hushed him.

But Clark had something else on his mind. "Lois... the baby... the Kryptonite... is... everything okay?"

The two elder Kents stared at Lois in shocked realisation. "Did the baby get hurt?" Martha finally asked, in a hushed whisper.

"I don't know," Lois confessed. "I just got a really agonising pain... it went away after I got the Kryptonite into the box, but I haven't felt the baby move since," she concluded in a terrified whisper.

Martha hurried to Lois and enfolded her in a hug. "Oh, honey!"

Jonathan joined them, reaching out to pat Lois's arm. "We'll just have to pray the baby's all right. But Lois, you saved our son's life. We'll never be able to thank you for that."

Lois's gaze moved to where Clark lay; his agonised eyes met hers, and she broke away from Martha to drop to her knees beside him. She traced the angular planes of his face with her palm; his temperature was still not normal, but the lines of pain were fading. "Clark... Clark, I thought I might have lost you," she sobbed, finally giving way to tears. His arms closed about her again.

Jonathan touched Martha's arm and drew her into the kitchen, leaving the two younger people alone together.

Later, the four sat in the living-room drinking tea while Lois explained how she had managed to find Clark; when she told how she had kept paging him, he reached out to squeeze her hand. "That told me you were looking for me, honey - I had no reason to hope you'd find me, but it helped me to feel close to you." She reached across to kiss his lips softly.

Clark spoke again, explaining how he had walked into the trap set for him. "I was *stupid,*" he castigated himself. "I walked in there without looking, and when I saw it was Luthor I didn't even go and grab him immediately. I gave him time to get the Kryptonite out of the box, instead of immobilising him."

"Clark." Lois gazed into his half-angry, half-sad eyes and silenced him with her expression. "You should be in bed - you're sick still." She got to her feet, reaching for him.

He shook his head. "Lois, you're still exhausted and hurt yourself." He glanced over at his father. "Dad?"

Leaning on Jonathan, Clark dragged himself into the bedroom, Lois and Martha following. Martha glanced again at Lois as they walked; the younger woman still looked pale and her eyes were dark-rimmed. Clark sat down heavily on the bed and Lois immediately, instinctively, went to him. Martha began to move towards her son as well, but Jonathan caught her arm.

"Martha, honey, he's Lois's concern now. Let her take care of him."

Reluctantly, Martha backed away; she knew Lois would take good care of her son, but she still couldn't help worrying about him. Putting on a bright voice, she called, "We'll get off to our hotel now, kids - we'll come back in the morning."

"Sure - thanks, Mom and Dad," Clark said, his voice sounding a little stronger than it had earlier.

"And Clark?" his father added. "We'll take care of that box you two brought back."

The Kryptonite, Lois realised; she had forgotten that was still in the apartment. Glad that it would be taken out of the way of Clark and the baby, she thanked Jonathan and Martha. Clark's parents left, switching off the living-room lights as they did.

Clark still sat on the bed, dressed in his Superman suit; Lois eyed it with a sigh. The last time she had tried to get him out of one of those it had been a very difficult task. At least she now knew where the fasteners were, but still... "Clark, honey, you'll have to help me here," she spoke insistently as her hand went to the shoulder-fastening of his cape.

Slowly, painfully, they managed to get his suit off, and Clark lay exhausted on the bed when the last section was finally peeled away. Wearily, Lois stripped off her own clothes, leaving them to fall on the floor. Without bothering to wash - she was too tired - she fell onto the bed beside Clark. Although she had thought he was asleep, his arms immediately closed around her, holding her tightly against him.

Some hours later Clark awoke, disorientated. In his dreams, he had thought he was still chained to the Kryptonite, on the floor of the FineFair warehouse; he had faced his death once again, this time with an unemotional feeling of inevitability. How ironic, he had dispassionately considered in his dream, when only a few hours earlier he had been reflecting on the frailty of humans, the ease with which the lives of his fellow inhabitants of Earth could be snuffed out. And he had been complacent about his own invulnerability, his own seeming immortality. How are the mighty fallen, it had seemed to him; the Man of Steel become the cringing, whimpering creature huddled on the floor.

But now, as he tried to reorientate himself, he realised that the excruciating pain had gone. It had faded some hours before, of course, he remembered; he had little recollection of the journey home in the cab, other than that he was freezing cold, could barely move and wanted nothing more than to block out reality. But he was no longer in agony, although every muscle in his body ached. This was a different sensation; painful in its way but not agonising; more like a throb. He moved one foot experimentally. Was this like the backache and aching calves Lois complained of?

Lois! Contrition and guilt assailed him as he thought of his fiancee. She had risked her life, and that of their child, to save him. She had been in pain when she had picked up the Kryptonite: he had seen her expression, seen her drop the green rock, heard her cry out. The baby, who shared his genes, had reacted adversely to the Kryptonite. And he distinctly remembered Lois saying to Martha that she had not felt the baby move since that event. Clark closed his eyes, unwilling to face what he was afraid were the consequences of Lois's encounter with Kryptonite. Their child - particularly over the past few weeks - had been an extremely active baby, frequently kicking out or thumping

with a fist. Lois had only half-joking commented that she was probably full of bruises inside, and had grumbled that she hoped, if their offspring proved to be as violent after the birth as before, that he or she chose Clark as the recipient of such attacks.

What if the baby had died?

Clark was hugely grateful to be alive, but he felt torn in two at the possibility that his life had been saved at the expense of their child's. He also couldn't bear to think of Lois's probable reaction; he knew she loved him, would have been devastated had he died, but she had carried this baby within her for eight months. It was a part of her, in a way he could never be - if their child was dead, what would that do to Lois? He should have gone with her straight to an emergency room last night, he realised. His only excuse, poor as it was, had been that he'd been in pain, barely aware of what was going on, and thus not thinking straight.

And Lois... brave, incredibly talented, an investigative genius - she had figured out what had happened to him, and had saved him. Her intelligence had bettered the Man Of Steel... well, that was obvious, he had been incredibly stupid after all, but she, without his advantages when it came to tracking someone down, had systematically reasoned, second-guessed his actions, followed hunches others would have described as crazy... and found him. He felt humbled, not for the first time where Lois was concerned. But had his stupidity and her bravery only led to further tragedy?

Lois stirred lightly beside him, and he opened his eyes to gaze at her in the faint light from the window. In repose she looked so peaceful, and yet he had a vague memory of her, as she had helped him to undress, with pale features and dark shadows under her eyes. She had looked unutterably weary and anxious. How could he bear to add to her pain?

She opened her eyes and gazed into his. "Clark? Are you all right?"

He met her gaze, his eyes sorrowful. "I've been better. But... you?"

Lois stretched wearily; she had been very tired last night, but very worried about the baby, so her sleep had been broken, restless. Her mind had also been filled with thoughts of what might have been: what if she hadn't managed to find Clark, what if she had arrived too late? But she recognised the look in his eyes as concern for her, and she reached out to trace the line of his furrowed brow.

"I'm fine, honey. But you - are you over the Kryponite yet?"

With a grimace, Clark explained the residual aches he was feeling; it was quite hard for him to describe, as he had very rarely felt physical pain. Lois asked whether his powers had returned; remembering that his enhanced hearing had been the first to return the last time he'd been exposed to the poisonous rock, he concentrated: nothing.

"How long did it take for them to come back last time?" Lois asked, continuing to stroke his hair and face with loving caresses.

Clark shrugged. "A couple of days. But the exposure then was nothing like this. Then, I was in the same room as the Kryptonite for a couple of minutes - later, Trask had it next to me, and I even had to touch the stuff, so my powers were gone again for about a day. This time, though, it was next to me for three or four hours." He sighed heavily. "My powers may never come back."

"You don't know that!" Lois protested.

"No, I don't. But it's possible." Clark fell silent, wondering how it would affect their relationship if he was powerless in future. Lois, watching him, wondered what was on his mind; after a few moments, she reached for his hand and held it tightly in hers.

"How would you feel if you were just like anyone else - if you couldn't be Superman any more?"

Clark paused for a moment. "I'm not sure. The last time, I did think the powers were gone for ever, and in a way I was almost pleased - I told you how difficult it sometimes was to be different. But when my powers came back, I realised I'd missed everything I took for granted before. I'm not sure I'd like to be normal - Superman is part of what I am. It'd be like not being able to be Clark Kent any more. Both identities are a part of me."

Lois nodded; somehow, she understood. Although she had fallen in love with Clark, the past month or so of living with Clark/Superman had taught her to appreciate the whole man, rather than simply one or other dimension, which was all she had seen in the past. After a few moments, she spoke. "I'd miss Superman too... but it was Clark I fell in love with, and if you did never get your powers back, it wouldn't make any difference to me." Reaching up, she pressed a tender kiss on the corner of his mouth.

Clark reached for her, kissing her fiercely. "How did you know?"

"That that was what you were thinking?" she finished for him. "Sometimes, Clark Kent, your expression speaks volumes - I could see the insecurity and doubt written all over your face. Just don't doubt me again, okay?"

He smiled crookedly, wrapping his arms around her. Then, hesitantly, he asked the question which had been on his mind all along, which he had been scared to put into words up to this point. "Lois - the baby?"

Her eyes clouded, and she allowed her head to fall into the crook of his shoulder. Her voice muffled, she replied, "I don't know. I still haven't felt any movement."

Clark's arms tightened around her as she felt a lump build up in her throat. His own voice was husky as he answered, "We need to get you an appointment with your doctor today."

"No!" Lois's voice was tense; she raised herself to stare into his face. Shocked to see tears glistening in Clark's eyes, she continued, "We can't take that risk. You know they'll want to do tests - what if they find out that the baby's different? That it couldn't be... human?"

Clark lay silently for a few moments, breathing heavily, clearly lost in thought. "If I have to tell your doctor who I really am, so be it," he replied at last, in a determined voice.

"I'd rather not," Lois answered.

"But the baby - we need to make sure he or she is okay," Clark replied anxiously. His hand reached down to curve protectively over her stomach. "If I had my powers, I'd be able to listen for the heartbeat, but at the moment I can't."

Lois nodded, accepting what he was telling her. Clark was right; they needed to ensure their child was all right. It was still too early to call her doctor, however, so she pulled him down beside her and lay in his arms, feeling intensely grateful that he was alive.

After some time, Clark slid lower in the bed, lying with his head on Lois's chest just above her swollen stomach. His large hands curved gently over her belly, stroking gently, as he began to talk to their unborn child. His low murmur brought tears to Lois's eyes as she listened to his words. He told their child how much she or he was loved, by both parents; how much they were looking forward to the birth, all of the things he and Lois were looking forward to doing with their son or daughter.

"Your mom and I are very worried about you at the moment, Baby Lane Kent," Clark continued in the same soft, low voice. "We need to know that you're still okay in there; we need to feel you move about. Even your mom won't mind if you kick her today. And your dad promises never to let Kryptonite get anywhere near you ever again."

Choking back her tears, Lois reached down to stroke Clark's hair as it rested just below her breasts. "You can't promise that, honey."

He glanced up at her, his own eyes moist. "I'm going to make sure Dad destroys that chunk."

"I know." She tugged at his shoulder. "Come here, sweetheart."

"Lois - my love," Clark whispered, sliding up to rest his cheek against hers. Their tears mingled as they kissed each other lovingly, passionately, as if they would never let each other go again.

"You saved my life," he told her, abruptly, a lump in his throat.

"You've saved mine dozens of times," she reminded him, her own voice catching. "Fair's fair."

"You've saved me a couple of times before now," he reminded her, a smile hovering about his mouth despite himself. At her puzzled look, he simply shook his head and kissed her again, deeply, his tongue invading her mouth as if he could never get enough of her succour and comfort. Time enough later, on some other occasion, to explain what she had done for him in the past without even realising; the time when she had given him the courage to continue as Superman when his own self-doubt had led him to put away the Suit; the time when she

had exposed the real cause of the 'heat-wave' which had led to him having to promise to leave Metropolis.

Their hands caressed each other, sliding over skin smooth as silk, touching sensitive zones and clinging desperately to each other. Clark had not imagined that he would be able to make love that morning; he hadn't expected to be physically capable, let alone that he would want to. But he found his body responding urgently to the stimulus of Lois's, and further investigation revealed that she seemed to want him just as badly.

They made love frenetically, desperately, as if coming together in this way could heal all the pain, the suffering, the anxiety of the past twelve hours or so. Afterwards, Clark collapsed beside Lois, for the first time realising the debilitating effect a climax had on an ordinary human male. The slight drop in energy he had experienced before had been nothing compared to this.

"This being normal takes a bit of getting used to," he murmured wryly after a few moments. "I'm not even sure I could drag myself to the shower at the moment."

"Are you still aching?" Lois asked, concerned.

He shook his head. "That's easing off, thankfully. Just as well, since your folks are coming around in a few hours, and I don't want Sam asking what's wrong with me." He paused, then looked thoughtfully, urgently, at Lois. "We could talk to Sam! About the baby, I mean. He's going to be family, after all - I don't mind telling him who I am if it means he can check the baby's all right."

Lois frowned, giving Clark a doubtful glance. "I'm not sure - I mean, Dad's a good doctor all right, but he was never a gynaecologist or a paediatrician. And I'm just not sure I want him to know about you."

"Lois - we need to get help," Clark insisted.

"Okay - we can think about it," Lois agreed, throwing back the covers and padding through to the bathroom.

Clark's parents arrived a couple of hours later, and were anxious to discover how Clark and Lois were the morning after their ordeal. Martha tried to be reassuring about the baby, pointing out that as far as she knew babies were a lot more resilient than people frequently appreciated.

The question of what to do about Luthor arose; Jonathan asked whether Superman should go to the police. Clark was doubtful, however. "At the moment, hardly anyone knows that Kryptonite can kill me - that there's anything which can harm me. If I go to the police, that becomes public knowledge. It also becomes public knowledge that Superman has no powers, and I don't want that." He sighed heavily. "Sure, I don't want Luthor getting off scot-free yet again, but I'd rather he went down for something else."

"He'll know by now it hasn't worked, I guess," Lois observed. "At

least, I assume he was planning on going back there this morning to collect the evidence." She grinned suddenly as she imagined Lex Luthor's shock as he entered the warehouse, expecting to find a dead Superman, only to find instead a pile of useless chains.

There were arrangements still to be sorted out for the wedding, though all four Kents were less enthusiastic than previously because of their concern about the baby. Sam and Ellen Lane arrived at Clark's apartment later that morning, to be introduced to Clark's parents and to travel with them to the wedding rehearsal.

The rehearsal went well; Jimmy, as Clark's best man, quickly learned his role and assured Clark, with a grin, that he wouldn't lose the rings. Lucy, arriving late with profuse apologies, kept winking at Jimmy from the opposite side of the aisle as she practised her role as Lois's bridesmaid. Even Lois's parents behaved surprisingly well, with no arguments or even threatened arguments.

As the small group exited the church into the bright sunlight, Lois grabbed Clark's arm suddenly as she emitted a sharp cry. Instantly, Clark wrapped his arm tightly around her, giving her a look of concern. "Honey, what's wrong?"

She caught his eye, a message in her own eyes meant only for him as she replied with a gasp, "The baby's kicking again - he's pretty lively all of a sudden!"

Clark's heart missed a beat; holding his breath, he slid his hand down over her stomach. As she'd told him, their child was making its presence known. He turned his gaze back to hers, staring in wonder and relief into her shining eyes. "Thank God, Lois!" he whispered, bending to kiss her tenderly, lovingly. She clung to him, legs shaking in reaction and relief.

Martha approached them, resting her hand lightly on Lois's arm. "Everything's okay then, honey?"

Clark met his mother's gaze. "Yes," he said simply. Martha nodded, hugely relieved but not wanting the Lanes and Jimmy to realise that anything had been wrong.

"Hey, break it up, you two!" Lucy exclaimed. "Time enough for that tomorrow, after you're married!"

"Hey, this is nothing," Jimmy assured her. "You should see how they've been carrying on in the office the past few weeks. There've been times I haven't known where to look!"

Feeling as if a leaden weight had been lifted from his heart, Clark carefully escorted Lois back to the Jeep and helped her into the passenger seat. Once he'd got his parents in the back and was driving back to his apartment, they'd be able to talk about what had happened, to express their relief and thankfulness that their unborn child was safe.

But his plan was foiled by Lucy, his sister-in-law to be, who ran up to the Jeep dragging Jimmy by the hand. "Clark - can Jimmy and I ride with you and Lois?"

Clark looked around anxiously for his parents, willing them to appear and rescue him from this situation. However, Lucy forestalled him. "My mom and dad are taking your parents back to your apartment - I heard Mother saying it would give them a chance to get better acquainted without you and Lois around to supervise." Lucy's mouth twitched humorously as she concluded her explanation.

Realising he had no choice, Clark opened the rear door of the Jeep before climbing in beside Lois. She reached across to squeeze his hand briefly, murmuring softly, "Later."

Later would be a long time coming, Clark mused ruefully; once they'd all returned to his apartment, they were going their separate ways. The Lanes were off to collect Lois and Lucy's dresses and any other paraphernalia; Clark was taking his parents and Jimmy to pick up the outfits for the groom's party. He would probably not see Lois again until they all met at the restaurant that evening, since she was taking with her everything she needed for the evening and for spending the night with her mother. He wouldn't even be able to talk to his parents about the relief he was feeling, since Jimmy would be with him.

It turned out to be as torturous an afternoon as Clark had anticipated, he considered later as he drove his party back to his apartment. Jimmy, eager as a puppy about his role as Clark's best man, and also excited about seeing Lucy again, had chattered virtually non-stop all day. When he wasn't telling them all yet again the ideas he'd thought of and discarded for his speech, he was asking Clark whether the older man thought that Lucy's behaviour meant that she was interested in Jimmy, and whether she would accept if Jimmy asked her out.

All in all, Clark heaved a huge sigh of relief when he finally closed the apartment door behind his young friend, who had decided to go home and change before the meal that evening. Turning to his parents, he saw amusement mingled with thankfulness in both their expressions, and he swiftly moved to embrace them both.

Lois, getting dressed for the evening ahead which she could only regard as an ordeal, was also feeling extremely frustrated. She had longed to have even five minutes alone with Clark, in which they could share their joy and relief that their baby had survived the Kryptonite. However, when they'd returned to Clark's apartment her mother's fussing had made that impossible. Concerned only with the arrangements and their plans for the afternoon, Ellen Lane had swiftly shepherded her daughter out to Sam's car once Clark had brought her overnight bag out of the bedroom. There hadn't even been time for a 'see you later' kiss, Lois thought resentfully.

She wondered whether they could engineer a few minutes alone together over dinner; it would be difficult, but what if they both pretended a need to use the bathroom at the same time? Where are your boyfriend's super-powers when you need them, Lois mused wryly; at any other time she would have been able to murmur her plan under her breath at the dinner-table and know that Clark would have heard. But he had no powers at the moment, and quite possibly never would again. Damn Lex Luthor and all his endeavours, Lois thought grimly. She and Clark

would see him disgraced and in prison if it was the last thing they did.

She still wanted to have words with Clark about his idiocy in going as Superman to confront Luthor on those occasions recently, as well as his carelessness in allowing himself to be caught at the warehouse. It was just the kind of reckless behaviour Clark tended to tell her off for, she realised - so he deserved to have a strip torn off him even more, since he certainly should have known better. But not yet... it was too soon, the emotional wounds for both of them were too raw. And since neither of them knew yet if Clark would ever regain his super-abilities, anything she might say at this stage would only rub that in unnecessarily. And anyway... she paused as the thought occurred to her: he already knew how careless and irresponsible he had been. The knowledge had been in his eyes as he had regarded her so sadly in bed the previous morning. He had thought that his thoughtless actions had killed their baby. No, she decided resolutely; that subject is closed.

Her hands, almost without volition, slid to her stomach, caressing the bump within which their child lay. He or she had been extremely active that afternoon, as if making up for the lack of activity earlier - either that, or making very plain his or her feelings about the pain the Kryptonite had caused. She hadn't minded, for a change; as Clark had observed that morning, she could have put up with any amount of ill-use by her son or daughter that day, simply for the joy of knowing the child was alive.

Her few minutes of peace came to an abrupt halt then as her mother rapped sharply on the bedroom door, entering a bare second later. "Lois, aren't you ready yet? Your father's arrived to take us to the restaurant."

Walking with her family into the Italian restaurant which had been chosen for the pre-wedding meal, Lois's eyes searched for Clark. Was he there? Although she had been aching to see him, she wasn't prepared for the sudden rush of happiness which flooded though her when her gaze alighted on his dark head. As if some sixth sense had alerted him to her presence, he turned away from the apparently earnest discussion he had been having with his parents and Jimmy, and stared straight at her. Their eyes met, and Lois again felt an enormous rush of love for this man, the alien from another planet who had swept her off her feet - not as the flying Super-hero, but as the gentle, self-effacing man who had become her best friend.

Excusing himself from the group, Clark crossed the restaurant to greet his future in-laws: a firm shake of Sam Lane's hand, a kiss on the cheek for Ellen, a brief but warm hug and kiss for Lucy, with whom he had struck up a firm friendship over the past few months. Lucy, he suspected, had known of his love for Lois long before he had imagined himself having the nerve to tell Lois himself; he had also guessed that, in her own way, she might even have pleaded his cause with her sister. Then, finally, his opportunity to turn to Lois. Her soft brown eyes met his, mutely asking a question; he answered as silently. 'Yes, I'm fine... but are you?'

He closed his arms around her, but only momentarily; this was neither the time nor the place. They kissed, but briefly; as she drew back

she whispered, "I think I must be pretty bruised inside after this afternoon." Fully appreciating her meaning, he squeezed her hand, in a gesture she fully understood, before leading the Lanes to their table.

Any further private talk was impossible over dinner; Lois and Clark sat opposite each other, but conversation remained general thanks to the need to keep the Lanes and Jimmy oblivious of any need for concern. Martha sat to Lois's left and managed, under cover of discussion of the menu, to ask whether she was still feeling okay; Lois assured her future mother-in-law that she was confident everything was fine.

"And Clark?" Lois murmured. "Have his powers returned?"

"No," Martha replied anxiously. "I know it took a couple of days last time, but this was worse... I know he's worried, but Jonathan and I haven't been able to talk to him about it."

After the meal, Ellen again took charge, insisting that Lois needed to get home to sleep; a few days ago, regardless of recent events, Lois might have agreed with her, but she was surprised to realise that she actually didn't feel tired tonight. She actually felt energetic for the first time in weeks; if she'd been home in Clark's and her apartment, she realised in amazement, she would probably have cleared out her closets or washed some clothes. Distinctly un-Lois-like activities, she knew; Clark actually did most of the housework - although since he tended to do it at Super-speed, it didn't take much time.

But both senior Lanes and Kents prevailed upon her to go back to her mother's apartment to rest, when in fact all she had wanted was to go somewhere with Clark for half an hour. *That* wouldn't have been on in any case, it seemed; her mother was determined that the proprieties should be observed for the brief remainder of Lois's time as an unmarried woman, regardless of the obvious proof that all proprieties had been abandoned long since between her daughter and Clark.

"Morning, Clark!" His mother's voice greeted him as he wandered into the kitchen in his bathrobe in search of coffee the following morning - his wedding day. His parents had spent the night at his apartment, Clark having insisted that there was no need for them to use a hotel when he could quite happily sleep on the couch.

Several minutes later, the three Kents sat around Clark's kitchen table, eating Martha's freshly-cooked breakfast with relish. Jonathan asked the question which was on both senior Kents' minds. "Clark, have your powers returned yet?"

Clark flexed his bicep experimentally, then focused his eyes on the dividing wall between the kitchen and his bedroom. "Nothing. Face it, Dad, this time they've gone for good."

"Clark Kent, I never thought you were a defeatist!" His father's voice was unusually harsh.

But Clark shook his head firmly. "I'm not. I just know how to

recognise reality. This is the second day, and there's nothing there. I guess I'm going to be just 'normal' after all." Although he tried to disguise it, his parents recognised the bleakness in his voice. Superman - the powers - was part of what Clark was; if he never regained them, he would not be the same person as before. And none of them, least of all Clark, was sure exactly how he would feel about that.

Martha reached across the table to grip his hand. "Are you worried that Lois might not care about you so much if you can't be Superman?"

Again, Clark shook his head, this time more decisively. "Not at all. I gave up that particular conceit some time ago - she assured me that she fell in love with Clark Kent, and I believe her. You know, sometimes I even wonder if she'd be happier if Superman didn't exist."

"Because you have to leave her to go and be Superman so often?" Martha guessed.

"Yep. But then she says she understands, and I just know that she does." Clark was calm, resolute, suddenly. "Lois loves me - I know that more surely than I have ever been convinced of anything in my life. We were meant to be together, and whether I have powers or not is irrelevant to our love. I'm going to marry the woman I love toady, and that's the most important thing on my mind right now." He got to his feet, and with a quick, reassuring smile for his parents, strode towards the bathroom to shower and shave.

To shave... with a wry grimace, he realised that he would be borrowing his father's razor again. He'd need to buy himself one, he thought - just one of the many habits he would need to change now that he was no longer Super-powered. No boiling water or frying eggs with his eyes. No clearing up or decorating at Super-speed. And he would have to overcome his dislike of commercial airlines since Superman Express was out of business. This being normal wasn't looking anything like as appealing as he had once thought it would be.

Still, in a few hours' time he would be marrying Lois. And with her by his side, he could cope with anything life threw at them.

Lois sat in front of the dressing-table mirror in her mother's spare room as she applied her make-up; after a frenetic couple of hours in which Ellen and Lucy had been driving her crazy with constant fussing, she finally had a few minutes to herself. She was finding it hard to concentrate on the task at hand. Rather than focusing on the wedding, which was barely two hours away, she was thinking about Clark. He still hadn't recovered his powers, she knew: they had managed a very brief telephone conversation an hour earlier when Martha had called Ellen, ostensibly to check that the two mothers weren't going to wear the same colour outfit, but in reality, Lois guessed, to allow the engaged couple a few words. In response to Lois's discreet question, phrased carefully to avoid arousing her mother's suspicions, Clark had admitted that he was still, as he'd put it, just like any other guy.

Lois frowned as she thought of the effect on Clark of losing what was such a major part of himself. For herself, whether he regained his powers or simply lived the rest of his life as no more than the man she had thought he was when she'd fallen in love with him just didn't matter. But despite Clark's apparently uncaring attitude, she was aware that it bothered him. He had always been super-powered; now that she knew him for what he really was, she knew that he would find it difficult to adjust. And - she gasped as the thought occurred to her - what if their child did inherit super-powers while Clark had none?

These were all things which would have to be faced, she determined. At least, once the wedding and reception were over, they would be able to be alone together. They were returning to Clark's apartment for their wedding night, and had planned a couple of days away as a very brief honeymoon, neither wanting to take up too much paid vacation time at the moment. Clark's original idea had been to fly them both somewhere - Paris, for instance - although he had been a little unsure about flying so far with her in his arms given her eight months' pregnant state. After all, he had argued, commercial airlines certainly wouldn't carry her. So nothing had been finalised about where they would go: his alternative suggestion had been that he would drive the Jeep up to New England and they could spend two nights in Vermont or somewhere like that. Well, they could still do that, Lois considered; she didn't actually care wherever they went as long as they were together and could *talk*.

She winced suddenly as a brief pain assaulted her. It wasn't the baby kicking this time - it was low down in her stomach, kind of like back pain but not quite... Indigestion, she decided; it must have been those eggs she'd had for breakfast. Her mother's cooking hadn't improved much, Lois thought wryly as she turned back to her preparations.

The wedding itself went smoothly, although Clark couldn't help feeling tense right up until the very moment when the Bridal March struck up and Lois was making her way slowly down the aisle towards him. He tried to resist turning to glance at her, saving up that privilege until she reached his side. She looked *beautiful*, he thought; gorgeous in her ivory satin Empire-line gown. He was barely conscious of anyone else's presence as the ceremony got under way: Jimmy by his side, Sam initially beside Lois and replaced by Lucy once Sam's part was over; the minister in front of them. He made his responses when he was required to; the rest of the time he gazed at Lois, allowing to sink in the incredible realisation that she was marrying *him*.

Finally, it was over; they were pronounced husband and wife; and he was allowed to kiss her. He took his time, reverently raising her veil and gazing deeply into her eyes, then curving his palm along her jaw to lift her chin. His lips lowered, claiming hers in a sweet, loving kiss.

"Hey, CK - break it up, you two!" Jimmy's voice interrupted the interlude, and regretfully Clark ended the kiss and turned to his best man. Jimmy's eyebrows had almost disappeared into his hair, and he was grinning at Clark. "You still have to sign the register before

you two can get out of here."

"Shame," murmured Lois, throwing him a wicked grin.

At last, they were in the car taking them to the reception; Sam Lane had hired a room in a local hotel where a meal would be served. Lois and Clark sat in the back seat, content just to cuddle and hold hands, knowing that they would be alone within a few hours.

Clark leaned across to kiss her again, withdrawing in concern as he heard Lois gasp and saw her grip the side of her stomach. "Are you okay, honey?"

She smiled wryly at him. "Indigestion. Not very romantic, huh?"

He smiled in return. "We'll get you something for that at the hotel, okay?"

Gripping her new husband's hand, Lois reached up to kiss his jaw lightly. "I think all I really need is to be alone with you."

"Soon." His kiss was a promise.

The reception passed by in a blur, it seemed to Lois; although the meal was good and - she hoped, at any rate - she had managed to keep up a lively conversation with the other guests, she and Clark had continually sought each other out during the proceedings. Even if they were only able to meet each other's gaze for a fleeting moment, that locking of eyes contained a renewal of promise: Later. Soon. Then they would be alone.

The indigestion didn't go away, though, and it was really getting annoying, she thought, gritting her teeth. The pain was now gripping her about every fifteen minutes, and she wondered whether anyone could get her some Pepto-Bismol. As another pain hit her, she sighed and hurried across to her mother. Ellen would have something with her - she suffered from heartburn, as Lois knew well.

Finding her mother talking energetically with Martha, swapping stories about their respective offspring as children, Lois made known her need. Ellen frowned, studying her daughter carefully.

"Indigestion? What exactly is happening, Lois?"

Lois shrugged. "It's nothing much, Mother - I just keep getting these pains in my stomach. About every fifteen to twenty minutes now."

Martha gasped and looked around for Clark and Jonathan. Ellen got to her feet and gripped her daughter by the shoulders. "Lois! You're having contractions!"

Suddenly, Clark was standing beside Lois, his eyes full of concern. "Lois? Honey? Is it the baby? But it's not due for another month..."

Ellen glanced impatiently at her son-in-law. "It sounds as if she's been in labour since this morning. Why she never said anything to me

I'll never know."

"How far apart, sweetheart?" Clark asked urgently.

"Fifteen... umph! - no, make that ten minutes," Lois gasped. In a swift movement, Clark swept her up into his arms and called out to his father, who had joined the small group, "Dad, have you got the Jeep keys?"

Ellen, Martha and Jonathan, joined by Sam, hurried after Clark. He was moving very quickly, especially considering that he was carrying a heavily pregnant woman; Jonathan had to run to catch up with him and unlock the Jeep. Gently, Clark placed Lois on the back seat and turned to Ellen. "Will you ride to the hospital with us? She needs someone to keep an eye on her."

"You go on ahead, son," Sam Lane spoke firmly from behind Clark's left shoulder. "I'll take your folks with me once I've made sure that young best man of yours knows what's happening. He and Lucy can make sure the guests are looked after."

The journey to the hospital was one of the craziest experiences of his life, Clark thought afterwards. Lois lay in the back of the Jeep with Ellen holding her hand; the pain of the contractions seemed to become worse as they drove. It tore him apart to hear his wife moaning in pain, but Ellen - who seemed to have turned all of a sudden into a capable and reassuring force - murmured soothing remarks to her daughter and kept Clark apprised of what was happening. Clark forced himself to concentrate on his driving; he was normally a good and very careful driver, with excellent reactions partly due to his Super abilities, but these circumstances were not normal. He almost crashed the Jeep when, two minutes from the hospital entrance, Lois gave a distressed cry.

"What's wrong?" he demanded, anguished and desperately wanting to be the one back there beside her.

"Nothing to worry about, Clark," Ellen insisted calmly. "Her waters have broken, that's all."

Oh God, Clark thought frantically. Is she all right... is the baby all right? He forced himself to focus on driving.

"Yeah, and the Jeep's going to need a full valet after this," Lois groaned. Despite himself, Clark grinned. That car was her pride and joy.

Finally, he pulled up outside the hospital entrance; jumping out of the car, he threw open the rear door and swung Lois into his arms. Not stopping to think about parking fines or towaway zones, he strode with her into the emergency room. Within a couple of minutes, however, he found himself standing alone, confused and worried, as the medical staff swept Lois off. Ellen found him there a short while later, still standing helplessly wondering what was happening to his wife.

She quickly assessed the situation, and her son-in-law's feelings, as she pressed the car keys into his hand. "I parked it over in the long-stay zone," she explained. "You want me to find out what's going on?"

He nodded gratefully, but before they could make any progress the doors burst open again and Sam Lane appeared with his parents, Lucy and Jimmy tagging along behind with a very concerned-looking Perry White.

Later that evening, as Clark sat on the edge of Lois's bed cradling his brand-new daughter in his arms, he laughed with her about his behaviour when they'd arrived. "You know," he told her, "I just stood there like an idiot. I hadn't a clue what to do - I was just worried about you and wanted to be with you. Your parents were great, though."

"I'm glad," she replied, her eyes glistening with tears as she watched her new husband rocking their daughter, his large but very gentle hands clasping her next to his heart.

"I'm sometimes amazed that you were ever able to fall in love with me, you know," he added suddenly. "Sometimes... I can be so *stupid*, it's as if all my common sense and intelligence has just hitched a ride out of town. Like when I first met you, and I thought you were so sophisticated and smart, and I was such a naïve hick. No..." he waved her to silence as she would have interrupted, "I can remember a lot about those first couple of weeks, Lois. Times when you said something to me, and all I could do was stare at you. I always managed to think of the right smart response later, but at the time... well, you must have thought I was a few sandwiches short of a picnic at times."

Lois smiled lovingly and reached out for his arm, patting it gently. "I guess there were times when I wondered what was going on inside that head of yours - but I never thought you were stupid. Clumsy, yeah... naïve too. But I always knew that the man you were was decent and good."

"No regrets?" he asked her softly, his gaze holding hers as he held Katherine Lara single-handedly while stroking her tiny cheek tenderly with his index finger.

She shook her head. "Never." Their eyes met for a long moment, then Clark leaned across to kiss his new bride and the mother of their daughter. It had been a hectic few hours, he thought; once Sam Lane had managed to establish where the delivery room was and to ensure that the clerk on duty realised that the baby's father was there and wanted to be with the expectant mother, Clark had finally been allowed to scrub, dress in greens and join Lois. He had held her hand throughout, wiping down her forehead with a damp cloth in his other hand, occasionally applying a quick blast of cooling super-breath whenever he had been sure no-one was looking. It had all happened very quickly: by the time Lois had been clerked she was already ten centimetres dilated, and less than two hours after they had arrived at the hospital she had been holding their daughter in her arms. Clark had been too choked with tears to say anything as he had gazed for the first time upon the dark head of their baby. It had been a tremendously emotional few hours: while Lois had been in labour, he had been torn between feelings of agony at the pain she was experiencing, and wonder at the miracle of birth.

Some minutes later, Lois reclaimed Katherine and began to feed her; Clark watched in wonder as his daughter suckled from Lois's breast, her tiny hands pushing and squeezing. "I could sit here all day and watch you do that," he whispered huskily.

She grinned at him. "I'm glad that does something for you - we won't be able to do much... you know... for a while!"

"Yeah... so much for a honeymoon," Clark muttered, but softened the effect with a broad grin. "I don't care - well, I do, but good things are worth waiting for. And this stunning little beauty is *definitely* worth a few sacrifices."

"Her grandparents seemed pleased with her too, didn't they?" Lois commented, remembering the hectic half-hour earlier when their families had been allowed in to spend time with the newest member of the family.

"Yeah, and Lucy was pretty excited to be an aunt," Clark added. "You know Jimmy wants to be godfather?"

Lois laughed. "You really think he'll set her a good example?"

"You never know," Clark replied thoughtfully. "I get the feeling Jimmy would be quite a strict father, you know."

"Unlike you!" Lois laughed. "This little one will have you wrapped around her little finger in no time!" She glanced upwards at her husband again, noticing his dark gaze directed at their daughter, who was still suckling. "Correction - she already has!"

"Guilty as charged," Clark murmured, laughter in his eyes. "And I know she'll learn how to make the most of it too. I guess it'll help that I'll have some advantages over her, at least until we know whether she'll have any super-powers, and even then it'll take her some time to develop them fully."

Lois shot Clark a curious look, not quite understanding his meaning. He smiled back, then realised he had yet to explain. "Lois, my powers are back," he murmured softly. "I realised at the reception. I don't quite know what it was, but some sense warned me that you were in trouble, and I... instead of looking around for you, I listened. I heard your heartbeat, and I realised it was faster than it should be. Then, as I was hurrying over to you, I heard your mother say you were having contractions."

"Your super-hearing," Lois whispered in wonder.

"Yeah. And the rest of my powers are back too. While I was getting changed, before I was allowed into the delivery room, I was watching you..." he touched his glasses lightly and gestured towards the walls. "I needed to be sure you were okay."

"And... everything else? The flying?" Lois asked tautly. She could tell this meant a lot to Clark, and she wanted him to be back to normal for his sake.

He grinned, and was suddenly levitating a few inches off the bed. "Don't worry, sweetheart, I'll be taking you flying again in a few days... once we have a babysitter lined up, I guess!"

"And, by the way," he added as an after-thought, "after I leave here tonight I think Superman's going to make a patrol. It won't do any harm to be seen out and about again... it'll certainly ensure Lex Luthor learns he didn't manage to get rid of me."

"No chance," Lois agreed. "He might as well learn that with the two of us on his case, he'll never succeed in doing that."

"Yeah," Clark agreed softly. "Another task for a Lane and Kent investigation...? Once my beautiful and very smart partner gets back to work, that is."

"Just don't do anything else involving Luthor without me, okay?" she asked.

"I wouldn't dare!"

Clark cast a final assessing eye around the bedroom of their apartment; all was ready. A quick Super-dash around the kitchen ensured that the groceries and baby paraphernalia which he'd purchased on that morning's trip to the supermarket were safely stored in the cupboards, and he was ready. Impatiently he seized the car keys and ran down the steps of his apartment building.

Lois paced the floor of her hospital room, impatiently looking again at her watch. Okay, he had agreed with her doctor that he would pick her up at two, and it was only one now. But he might have realised that she wanted to get home, and come to get her earlier, mightn't he, she grumbled to Katherine Lara, already known as Katy.

To her delight, the door opened suddenly and her husband stood there. He crossed swiftly to her side and kissed her passionately, almost as if they hadn't seen each other less than three hours ago. Releasing her, Clark smiled. "I've sorted out all the paperwork and bills, so my two favourite ladies are all set to go." He picked up the bassinet Lois's parents had given them as a present and wrapped his free arm around Lois's shoulder, escorting them out to the car.

Back at the apartment, Katy was shown her new living-quarters while Clark drew Lois down to sit beside him on the bed. "Just making up for lost time," he whispered, allowing his sensitive fingers to trail down her throat and inside the open front of her maternity blouse. "I know we can't do much, but I can at least hold you."

"Yeah... it's been so long," she agreed huskily. "I *had* hoped to have you to myself for at least a few weeks before Katy arrived..." she sighed, "...but that's life, I guess."

"I guess." Clark's voice was distracted; he was occupied in trailing kisses along his wife's jaw and neck.

"You know," Lois added a few moments later, "the doctor said she didn't seem small enough to be premature - he wondered whether I'd got my dates wrong."

Clark straightened. "No chance of that. We know that for a fact."

"Yeah. You never know..." she shrugged and ran her hand lovingly through his thick dark hair, "maybe the Kryptonian gestation period is shorter or something."

"I don't know," Clark replied, shrugging. "I just know I'm very happy she's all right. Even after you said you could feel her move, I was still worried that she might have been hurt in some way."

"Seems all right so far!" Lois laughed, as their daughter made it known loud and clear that she was in need of some attention. Her parents reluctantly dragged themselves away from each other and off the bed to see what was required. Lois grimaced. "Diaper change."

Clark took his wife gently by the shoulders. "I'll do it. Why don't you get us a drink - I'll be out in a minute."

Lois padded out to the kitchen, noting with approval that Clark had stocked up again on her favourite cream soda. A few moments later, she was attracted back to the bedroom by the sound of her husband's voice, crooning softly to their daughter. She peeped in.

Katy was lying on the bed, naked, while Clark lay propped up on his elbow beside her, his glasses on the nightstand and his hair flopping over his forehead. His shirt lay on the floor - by the look of it, she had spat up on him - and his bare chest glistened in the soft light. He was tickling Katy's stomach with his index finger as he gazed down at her with an expression of pure love and wonder. He was speaking - nonsense words mostly, but in among this baby-talk he was also promising to take care of his daughter and protect her.

"You look just like your mom, and that only makes me love you even more," Clark crooned. "She's beautiful, and smart, and she's got a wonderful smile which makes me melt inside... she loves to go flying, and I know you're going to as well. When you're older, my darling daughter, I'll take you flying above the clouds in my arms and tell you all about your family and where we come from. And your mom and I will always love you and protect you."

As Lois watched, Clark bent his head so that his hair brushed Katy's dark head, and his lips gently caressed his daughter's face. The intimacy between father and daughter made Lois feel almost like an intruder; but then Clark's super-hearing must have alerted him to her presence. He looked around and extended his arm towards her, inviting her to join them.

Lois padded over to her husband and daughter, lying on the bed beside Clark with their daughter chuckling and making little baby-noises between them. Who would have thought it a year ago, she mused as she allowed her fingers to caress Clark's chest. That she would be madly, crazily in love, married to Clark Kent, and that they would have a beautiful baby daughter? She would have laughed in the face of anyone who had suggested it. But she had been so wrong to write him off as a 'hick from Nowheresville', and she was so glad that she had found that out. Now, she wouldn't have things any other way. It was truly a super life.

Clark's mouth reached over to cover hers, blocking out any further coherent thought.

- The End -

End
file.